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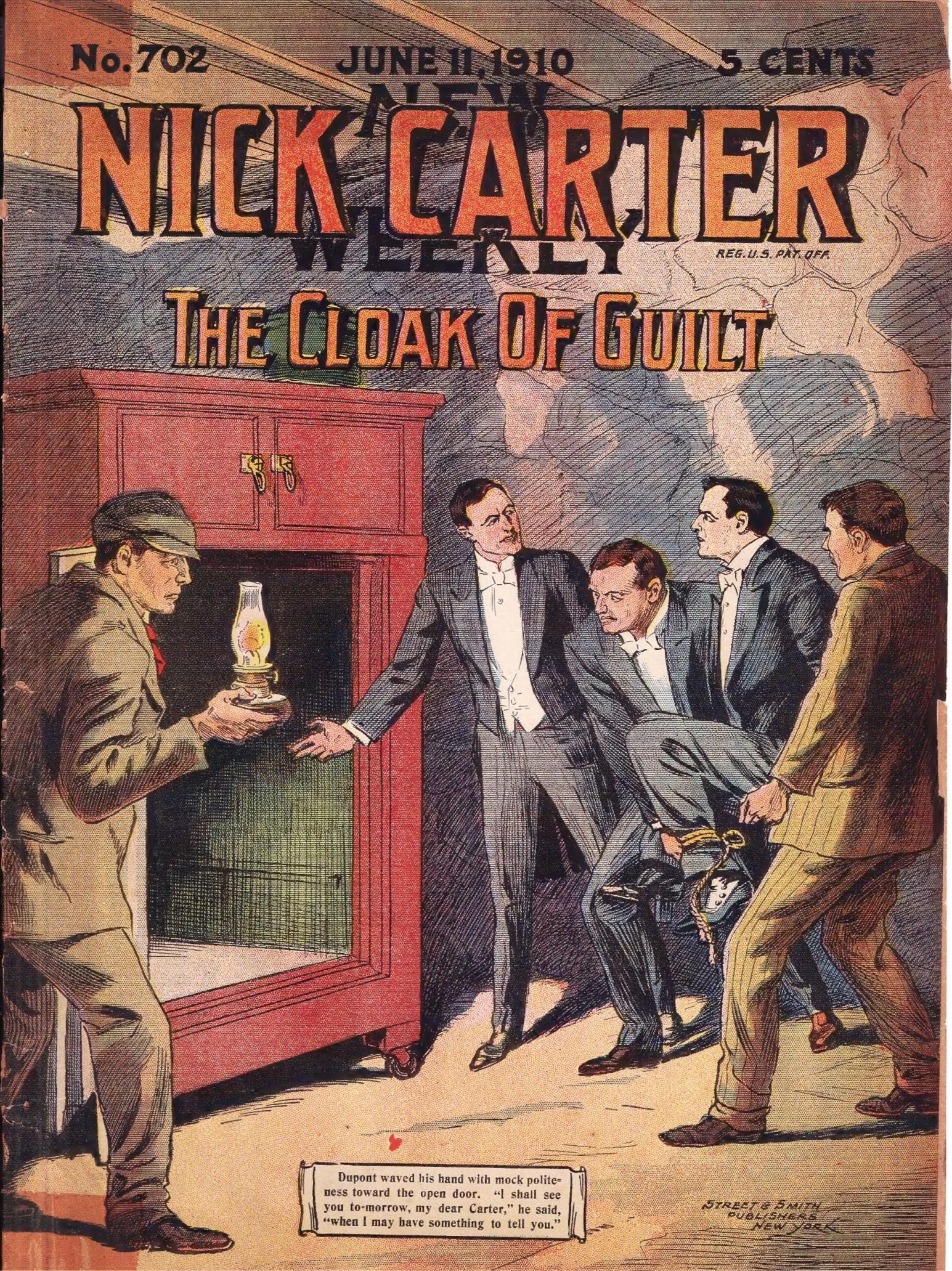
NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

REG. U.S. PAT. OFF.

THE CLOAK OF GUILT



Dupont waved his hand with mock politeness toward the open door. "I shall see you to-morrow, my dear Carter," he said, "when I may have something to tell you."

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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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THE CLOAK OF GUILT;

OR,

Nick Carter in the Snare of His Double.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

AN UNEXPECTED VISITOR.

"It's a gentleman, Mr. Carter."

"To see me, Mary?"

Nick glanced up from a letter he was reading. He was seated at his desk in the business office in his New York home, in company with two of his assistants, Chick Carter and Patsy Garvan, all engaged over an unusually large morning mail.

"Yes, sir."

"Didn't he give you his card, or mention his name?"

"No, sir. But he's so nicely dressed and spoke so finely, sir, that I let him in while I told you."

"Find out who he is and what he wants," Nick said, a bit bluntly. "I'm too busy to bother with anything unimportant."

It was about ten o'clock one morning in December, only two days since the winding up of a stirring case of robbery—committed by none other than the notorious and exceedingly slippery individual at that moment at Nick's door, a crook whose unparalleled nerve, remarkable accomplishments, and extraordinary criminal career had staggered the police of two continents. Nick Carter was the first detective who had coped with him successfully, and even he had breathed a sigh of satisfaction upon lodging him in prison two days before.

The maid, who had answered the visitor's ring, withdrew and presently returned to report.

"If you please, sir, he says his business is very important and you must see him right away."

"Must, eh?" Nick repeated. "Does he think I have no alternative? Did he give his name?"

"Yes, sir. He said I must tell you his name is—Gaston Dupont."

"Gaston Dupont!"

Nick echoed the name with a look of amazement, which was reflected in the faces of his assistants.

"Thundering guns!" Chick exclaimed, gazing.

"Holy smoke!" supplemented Patsy, with an inquiring stare at his chief. "It's only two days since we put him in the jug. Gee! he can't be out again, Mr. Carter. That's all punk! Somebody's handing you a phony one."

"I'll see about it," said Nick, with unusual grimness. "Show the man in here, Mary. We'll soon

know whether that slippery eel has wriggled clear again."

He came tripping in presently, this Gaston Dupont, bowing and scraping, smiling, and waving his gloved hands as graciously as if his visit was an honor graciously conferred.

His lithe figure was scrupulously well clad, his linen immaculate, his crafty, clean-cut face smoothly shaved and powdered. Jack Frost had given his cheeks a tinge of red, and he brought in the freshness of the crisp December air. His steel-blue eyes were almost as brilliant as the solitaire diamond in his cravat, and sparkling as if with amusement. A man just from the hands of his valet could not have looked better.

"Out of jail!" thought Patsy, with a wide-eyed stare at him. "Gee! he's just out of a bandbox. There's nothing to it. This gazabo is certainly the limit, the real goods, the whole show and the footlights thrown in."

Nick Carter received him without rising, with a frowning stare.

It had no more effect upon Dupont than a drop of rain on a duck's back.

"Ah, my dear Carter!" he exclaimed gayly. "We meet again. I am charmed—delighted! I see you are surprised—and I hope not less pleased. How nice it is to renew old acquaintance, to resume pleasant relations. It is a penchant of mine, a special delight, that of giving others an agreeable surprise. How do you do, Mr. Chick? Charmed, I'm sure, to see you again. And this young man, too. Patsy, I think you are called. I'm delighted, really."

With which glib introduction, accompanied with numberless bows and smiles, Mr. Gaston Dupont, without awaiting an invitation, complacently took a chair and began to remove his gloves.

Nick gazed at him with furrowed brows.

"Why are you here, Dupont?" he demanded. "How came you out of jail?"

"Out of jail! Dear me, what a question!" Dupont exclaimed, with a smirk and grimace. "Really, my dear Carter, you owe me an apology for having put me in such a dreadful place. Surely, you did not suppose I would stay there."

"Well, I had an idea you might," Nick said dryly.

"Nonsense! Absurd!" Dupont protested, shrugging his shoulders and laughing softly. "I really believe you are joking. Bolts and bars, prison walls, the narrow confines of a stone cell, the atmosphere of vice and degradation, the bitterness of penal servitude—really, my dear Carter, I am entirely unfit for such things. They are revolting to my refined and sensitive nature."

Nick could not repress a smile at the fellow's audacity.

"Well, Dupont?" he said. "Go on."

"You should have thought of it all when you subjected me to such a humiliation," Dupont continued. "You should have been more considerate, much more considerate. But I have not come here to complain, nor to scold you."

"That's very good of you, I'm sure."

"I know that only a foolish sense of duty actuated you, of course, not any personal antipathy to me. Such a sentiment would be inconceivable, my dear Carter, really inconceivable."

"You have not answered my question," said Nick, still frowning at the smiling scamp, though he had let him run on in his volatile, equivocal fashion.

"Your question?"

"How came you out of jail?"

Dupont laughed and fell to rubbing his slender white hands.

"On bail, my dear Carter," he replied glibly. "I am out on bail, a most exorbitant bond. I would not have believed that his honor, the judge, could have been so exacting."

"If his honor knew you as well as I do, you would still be in jail."

"Ah, don't say so, my dear Carter," Dupont demurred, with a sly leer. "One never knows what one would do under such conditions—and under pressure."

"Pressure?"

"My resources are almost unlimited, you know, and I employ the best legal talent. What cannot a clever lawyer accomplish? Really, it's quite wonderful. Allow me to hand you my attorney's card. You know him, I am sure. You may consult him, my dear Carter—you may consult him at my expense, in fact, if you are interested to know just how my release was brought about. To tell the truth, I don't. I know only that I am out. Bradley is a capital adviser, and such a clever fellow!"

Nick glanced at the card without accepting it—that of one of the brightest criminal lawyers in the country.

"What a funny thing law is!" Dupont ran on, smiling with serenity upon his hearers, than whom he had no more determined foes in all the world. "Have you ever thought of it seriously, my dear Carter? The

law says I am out only on bail—but I feel sure I shall never return."

"You'd better get that idea out of your head," said Nick quietly.

"No, no, not at all. I cannot even think of it, in fact. The little trouble, the trivial difference between me and the law, will be adjusted in some way. If not—ah, well, I can repay my bondsmen and hardly feel the expenditure."

"You have considerable nerve, Dupont, to come here and make that assertion," returned Nick, sternly regarding the scamp.

"Ah, but I do not come for that," Dupont quickly protested, not in the least ruffled. "That, my dear Carter, was only incidental to our remarks. I would not make an assertion to which you could take legitimate exception—no, no, not for the world."

"What do you want here, Dupont?"

"I call on business, very important business, my dear Carter, I assure you."

"I know of no business that you can have with me."

"Ah, to be sure! How can you know before I inform you?" questioned Dupont, with insinuating suavity. "I shall be delighted to tell you, and you to hear me, I am sure. It is a grand proposition, my dear Carter, a splendid project that will be to our mutual advantage."

Nick knew that he could have no interests in common with such a scoundrel. Curiosity, however, together with a feeling that he might detect him in some secret and subtle knavery, impelled Nick to hear what he had to say.

"What is this splendid project?" he asked.

"I would prefer," Dupont smiled signficantly, with a bow and wave of his hand toward Chick and Patsy; "I would prefer, if you please, to discuss it with you alone. In fact, my dear Carter, I cannot consistently do so under other conditions."

"That is interesting," observed Nick, eying the fellow sharply.

"You will presently appreciate my reasons, I am very sure."

"Yes, no doubt. I know you to be a rascal of the first water, a treacherous dog capable of almost any desperate deed. Have you, by accident, a gun in your pocket?"

Dupont threw up his hands and fell to laughing as if greatly amused.

"Why, why, you surprise me, my dear Carter!" he cried, in bantering fashion. "A gun in my pocket—no, no, on my word."

"Your word! Good security, that!"

"Why should a peaceable man of my sort carry a gun? One does such impulsive things, takes such foolish chances of doing murder and then being done in the chair, when one carries firearms. No, I have no weapon, I assure you. Really, really, this is the first time I have known you to betray the white feather, to show signs of fear."

"There is a vast difference," Nick grimly answered; "between fear and discretion."

"Ah, yes, to be sure!" Dupont exclaimed, still laughing. "That did not occur to me. Forgive me! I thought, at first, that you showed a yellow streak. I should, of course, have known better."

"There is more truth than poetry in the last," Nick rejoined. "If you still have any doubts, Dupont, you start something when you feel sure you have all the best of it, and you'll find out how much saffron there is in me. Step into the library, Chick, you and Patsy, and I'll hear what this scamp has to say."

"Ah, my dear Carter, you'll pardon me," Dupont quickly interposed, with immediate gravity.

"Well, what now?" said Nick impatiently.

"Please make your instructions explicit," said Dupont, smiling with sinister significance.

"Explicit?"

"I am aware that you may have many devices for taking advantage of visitors," Dupont went on with bland effrontery. "If there are peekholes from without, or means enabling one to play the eavesdropper, I beg that you will instruct your two very clever assistants to keep away from them during our discussion. You will, I feel sure, pardon me for reminding you."

Chick and Patsy stood scowling darkly at the insinuating rogue. Nick, however, smiled a bit grimly and waved them from the office.

"Be sure, Chick, that we are not overheard," he said pointedly. "I will ring when our interview is ended."

"All right."

Chick responded with expressive bluntness, while he withdrew with Patsy and closed the office door.

CHAPTER II.

AN AUDACIOUS PROPOSAL.

They sat confronting each other in silence for a moment—Nick Carter and Gaston Dupont.

Two men farther removed from one another in the social scale could not have been found.

The one was a peerless detective; the other was a master crook. Their interests were directly opposed. They were as bitterly antagonistic as foes on the field of battle. One stood for the majesty of the law; the other, for anything lawless. They were, and both knew it, worthy one another's steel.

Nick Carter was the first to break the brief silence.

"You had better not overlook one fact, Dupont," he said curtly.

"What is that, Mr. Carter?"

"Though you may speak without fear of an eavesdropper, I shall probably tell my assistants all that you say to me."

Dupont stroked his chin with his fingertips and laughed, steadily gazing at the strong, stern face of the great detective.

"I expected no less," he rejoined, with sinister indifference.

"Very well, then."

"It is not what you may tell them, but what all three of you, if they had remained, might some day testify in court," Dupont coolly asserted. "Three against one, you know, might convince a judge and jury. Against you alone—ah, well, the law regards the word of one as weighty as that of another. You might assert; I could as forcibly deny. I merely guard against future possibilities—remote, very remote, though they are."

"Evidently, then, your splendid project, as you call it, is a lawless one," Nick said, with a darker frown. "No less could be expected of you."

Dupont laughed again and moved his chair nearer that of the detective.

"Don't be so severe, my dear Carter," he said more gravely. "Very few men conform strictly to the law. If the truth were known, who would escape hanging? Only the Croesus who can buy immunity from punishment. We live in an era, so to speak, of dog eat dog."

"My time is too valuable, Dupont, to enter into any ethical discussion," Nick said bluntly. "Come to the point."

"Delighted, I'm sure. Pardon the digression."

"What do you want here?"

"To overcome, if possible, an undesirable friction," answered Dupont suavely.

He had, nevertheless, dropped his affected blandishments, and his cold, penetrating eyes had taken on a venomous gleam and glitter.

"What do you mean by an undesirable friction?"

"We have not been good friends, Detective Carter; in fact, quite the contrary," Dupont proceeded. "I approach you to-day under a flag of truce, so to speak, as foes meet to confer on a battlefield. For a brief interval, then, if it cannot be made permanent, let our relations become friendly, that we may confer without prejudice and as man with man."

"Confer about what?"

"A peculiar position in which I find myself," said Dupont. "I never before have known anything like it; or, at least, anything quite approaching it. You, Mr. Carter, are the cause of it."

"I will hear you explain," Nick said coldly.

"I can do so briefly."

"So much the better."

"Of late, you have been a great annoyance to me," said Dupont, still more seriously. "You repeatedly have interfered with my business affairs, in a way and with results not at all to my liking, and more or less disastrous. Many of my former associates are in prison. You have gone so far, even, as to place me there temporarily, and subject me to much trouble, expense and humiliation."

"Indeed! Very likely I shall do the same again."

"If I were a less capable and persistent man, without vast resources at my command," Dupont proceeded, as if there had been no interruption, "you would have brought me nearly to the brink of ruin. I frankly admit it, Mr. Carter; and as frankly, too, I assert that they must not continue."

"What must not continue?" Nick asked, suppressing a growl.

"These persecutions on your part," Dupont replied, with a sinister nod.

Nick smiled.

"In all my checkered career, Mr. Carter, this is the first time I ever approached a detective in this way. I have, nevertheless, encountered some of the most noted police officers in the world."

"So I have heard."

"I have been up against the pick of the French detectives, only to laugh at their efforts to ensnare me. The brightest lights of Scotland Yard were hardly worthy of my serious consideration. On three different occasions, moreover, I found myself opposed by a curious, egotistical Londoner, one Sherlock Holmes, by whose peculiar methods and persistent attentions I was somewhat annoyed, but by no means deterred from my customary vocation. As a matter of fact, I now have put him out of commission. In a nutshell, Mr. Carter, you are the only detective whom I have felt the slightest occasion to seriously fear."

Nick had let him run on and sat grimly regarding him, bent only upon learning what the rascal had in view. He frowned a bit impatiently and remarked:

"You do not come to the point."

"I am approaching it," Dupont replied. "I want you to know, to begin with, why I am thus actuated."

"Go on."

"A little later, though I cannot consistently say precisely when," Dupont smiled slyly; "I shall execute a very remarkable piece of work, one of my grandest coups, a veritable masterpiece of my much censured art."

Nick nodded.

"I frankly confide this to you, Mr. Carter, that you may see how very important it is that I should have, under the conditions mentioned, some definite and desirable understanding with you. I realize that much may depend upon it. I am not blinded with egotism. I recognize your remarkable ability, and I humble myself to avert even a possibility of greater misfortune. I think you understand me. Let us now consider the matter from another standpoint. That of a pure and simple business transaction."

"What do you mean, Dupont, by a business transaction?" Nick asked, with ominous quietude.

"I am about to make you an offer."

"What kind of an offer?"

"One that you cannot well afford to reject," said Dupont, with unruffled assurance. "I am going to pay you liberally, very liberally, on condition that you will let me alone hereafter; that you will interfere in no way with my business ventures. I will forget the past. I will forget and forgive. We will let bygones be bygones, and hereafter assume a friendly relation."

"In other words, Dupont, you have come here to offer me a bribe?" Nick said.

"Well, yes, that is the less refined way of putting it."

"Dupont, you have a colossal nerve."

"I have also," smiled Dupont, "the money with which to make good."

"How make good?"

Dupont leaned forward and laid his tapering forefinger on the detective's knee.

"I shall make you an offer, Carter, that you cannot afford to decline," he repeated impressively. "You may wonder at it, that I am willing to make you a wealthy man, in order to continue my work unmolested by you. That, however, is another story. I shall pay you in cash, no less than half a million dollars. I might add a little more, even—possibly a hundred thousand or two. You shall have this money in cold cash, provided——"

"Cut it out!" Nick interrupted. "You've said enough, Dupont. I have no time to waste in such a discussion."

"Waste!" Dupont echoed in amazement, drawing back in his chair. "You really don't mean, Mr. Carter——"

"I mean just what I say," Nick again interrupted, more sharply.

"That you reject my offer?"

"Yes, absolutely."

"Half a million dollars!"

"Yes, or ten times half a million," Nick sternly insisted. "You have picked up the wrong man, Dupont. Understand one thing right here: I cannot be bought by a crook for love nor money."

"You amaze me!"

"Another point, too, you must not overlook," Nick said with augmented severity. "I know you to be as crafty, clever, and dangerous a crook as ever stood in leather. You are a constant menace to the community, a cancer in the body of society. I have only one sentiment for such a rascal. Rather than accept a bribe from you, however large, Dupont, I would pay a good round sum to land you in Sing Sing prison for the rest of your life."

"You would, eh?"

"Yes. Furthermore, I shall do it sooner or later, Dupont, without any personal expenditure."

Dupont sat silent for a moment. His clean-cut white features had undergone a great change. All that was evil in the rogue's nature appeared on the surface. The look of the criminal, the desperado, the assassin, had settled on his face. His eyes had a savage gleam. His lips were drawn like those of a dog about to bite.

"Do you realize what this refusal, this threat, will mean to you?" he asked, with vicious asperity.

"Don't bother your brain with that—I shan't," Nick answered. "What it will mean for you is what you had better consider."

"I shall do more than consider."

"Do what you like, Dupont, provided you are able."

"I shall sweep you out of my path."

"Yes?"

"You have become an intolerable annoyance to me, a dangerous menace," Dupont declared, shaking his fist at his hearer. "Our relations, if you refuse this

offer, become such that one of us must go to the wall, down and out forever."

"That is your programme, eh?"

"It will not be me, but you, that shall be the victim," Dupont snarled. "I will find a way to down you."

"It's up to you, Dupont."

"I give you warning, Carter; I give you warning. I will strike when you least expect it, in a way that you cannot anticipate. I will floor you with a blow that you cannot guard."

"If you have nothing more important than threats to add," Nick said with more austerity; "you will please consider this interview ended."

"You still refuse my offer?"

"I refuse even to consider it."

"But——"

"There aren't any buts, Dupont," Nick sharply interrupted. "Furthermore, if you continue in this strain, I will kick you out of my house."

Dupont's face changed like a flash, resuming its former smile.

"Very well, my dear Carter; very well," he said with mock politeness, at once rising and beginning to draw on his gloves. "I could not think of putting you to so much trouble."

"It wouldn't be much trouble, at that," Nick returned. "Come, get out. Last call."

Dupont smiled in sardonic fashion and bowed himself to the door.

"I bid you au revoir, my dear Carter," he said, lingering for a moment. "We shall meet again. It will be under different conditions. I am glad to know, at least, that we have come to a definite understanding. You shall learn a little later in what way I will make good. Au revoir, my dear Carter. Au revoir."

Nick Carter neither answered nor looked at the rascal.

CHAPTER III.

THE VOICE FROM WITHOUT.

Though he knew Gaston Dupont to be a dangerous man, capable of any desperate deed, any degree of treachery, Nick Carter did not worry much over the threats he had made. It had become second nature to him to live in an atmosphere of peril, in the shadow of direful predictions made by criminals whose enmity he had incurred.

Nevertheless, Nick kept his eye peeled for a time, knowing that Dupont never threatened idly and that he might strike at any opportune moment. A knife-thrust in the dark, a bullet from behind, a bumb hurled from some unsuspected concealment, or poison stealthily and craftily administered—Nick knew him to be capable of either, and he guarded himself against all.

Nothing occurred, however, to give him special uneasiness. Nearly two months passed without a sign from the rascal, yet the vigilance of the detective did not wane. He continued to be watchful from force of habit, as it were, rather than from fear.

Apparently, however, Gaston Dupont had stepped off of the stage of action. He had disappeared, had vanished as if the earth had swallowed him. Though indicted for robbery, he failed to appear for trial, for which he was under heavy bonds, and his conviction went by default.

Warrants were immediately issued for his arrest, but neither detectives nor police could find him; and so matters stood on the last day of January, two months after his call upon Nick Carter and the utterance of his threats.

It was an unseasonable night, mild and murky, with a mist in the air, and the last vestige of recent snow gone from every sheltered nook and open gutter.

Nevertheless, the throng at the Grand Opera was greater than usual, a crowd that packed the house to its doors, with a display of fashion and beauty, costumes and jewels, unsurpassed during the entire season.

Nick Carter happened to be there that night, in company with two women friends and Chick, the party occupying a box near the stage. The second act was in progress, with the famous prima donna, Madam Arconi, in the title rôle, when an incident occurred that instantly diverted Nick's interest from the magnificent stage picture.

Through a portière that hung across a door leading into his box he heard the voices of two men in the corridor, a narrow passage that flanked a small portion of the auditorium, and terminated at a small door opening upon a lower corner of the stage, several feet to the right of the prompter's station and the first wings.

"Are you sure it is he?" asked one. "In this box?"

"Yes, absolutely!" was the reply.

Seated back of the others in his box, Nick was the only hearer, and he could have sworn that the voice of the latter speaker was that of Gaston Dupont.

At once suspicious, recalling that many a tragic crime had occurred in a theatre, Nick quietly arose and stepped out of the box, unobserved by either of his companions.

The narrow corridor, curving around the sweep of the boxes at that point and running out to the foyer, was deserted. In neither direction was there any sign of the two speakers.

"That's strange," thought Nick, glancing at the curtained doorway of the box next to his own, and then at that leading to the stage, some twenty feet away. "Can they have slipped away while I was stepping out here? That seems hardly possible. Maybe, by Jove! that the rascal is in the next box, which might account for my having heard his voice so distinctly."

Nick approached the door of the box, instinctively stepping lightly, though there then was no need of such caution. The sudden swell of orchestral music, with an outburst of song from the vast chorus on the stage, would have drowned any ordinary noise that he might have made.

Cautiously moving one edge of the portière, Nick peered into the box. It contained four women and one man, a corpulent, round-shouldered man with a bald head. One glance at his huge face and flabby jowls convinced Nick that he could not possibly be Gaston Dupont. Clever though the rascal was in perfecting a disguise, a veritable artist in that line, in fact, Nick saw at once that such a transformation was impossible.

The lights were down in the auditorium. The obscurity was the greater because of the glare of light on the stage. The heads of the vast audience, the white shoulders of fashionably clad women and the flutter of innumerable fans—only these could be seen, and seen only indistinctly.

Nobody noticed the detective, moreover, nor was he missed by either of his companions. The attention of one and all was fixed upon the stage.

Nick dropped the edge of the portière and stood motionless for several minutes, concealed in the doorway from the view of any person who might approach through the narrow corridor.

"I'll swear I heard that scamp's voice out here," he said to himself. "I know it too well to have been mistaken, and it must have come from this direction. I'll wait a while and take a chance that he will come this way again."

Nick waited for nearly ten minutes, unobserved, stealthily watching and listening. Familiar with the opera, he knew that the act then was nearing its end. Stepping from his concealment, he was about to return to his box, when, for a second time, he caught sight of the door at the end of the passage.

"That must lead to the stage," he muttered, abruptly halting. "It may be, by Jove! that the rascal went that way. He may be acquainted with some of the company, or have permission to visit the stage. I'll see! If there's any chance of arresting Dupont, I'll be hanged if I'll let it get by me. It's a hundred to one that he went this way—he got out of the passage so quickly."

Nick had approached and turned the knob of the door. He found it unlocked, and, without hesitation, he passed through and closed it behind him.

The scene upon which he entered was a confusing one at that moment. The act had just ended. The drop-curtain had fallen. The elaborate stage picture was breaking up. The ensemble, a great chorus in glittering costumes, was beginning to scatter.

From in front came the tumultuous plaudits of the vast audience. The drop-curtain was being drawn aside for Madam Arconi to step out to respond to the swelling encore.

Nick stood motionless for a few seconds, gazing around to determine what course he would take.

There was a glare of light in the middle of the stage. The spaces between the several receding wings were thronged with people, performers slipping away to their dressing rooms, stage hands in readiness to strike the scene, a number of fashionably clad men having the privilege to visit the stage—all forming a crowd in which a single individual would hardly be noticed.

Through a passage between the row of wings and the wall Nick caught sight of two men near the upper corner of the stage, evidently hastening toward a corridor and stairway leading to the stage entrance. He had only a glimpse of them just as he appeared on the scene, but their backs were turned and he saw the face of neither. One of them, however, made a backward gesture that Nick afterward remembered.

Within half a minute, however, while he still lingered near the door by which he had entered, there arose above the noise and confusion on the stage a sound that chilled the blood of every hearer, caused one and all to stop short and stand as if suddenly turned to stone, with cheeks blanched and eyes turned in the direction of the startling cry.

It was a single, piercing shriek, thrilling in its ter-

rible intensity; one awful scream freighted with horror, obviously from the lips of a woman.

Then followed three words that told the tragic story:

"Help! Help! Murder!"

CHAPTER IV.

INTO A SNARE.

The startling cries came from an opposite corner of the stage, diagonally across it from where Nick Carter was standing.

He could not see what had occurred. The glare of light, the glittering costumes, the spellbound throng—he saw only these for the moment, and that he could not quickly make his way through the crowd in a direct line to the scene of the disturbance.

Instead, therefore, he ran straight up the stage between the ends of the left wings and the near wall, intending to cross back of a drop-scene and thus reach the point from which the cries had come.

Half a dozen strides took him to the upper corner of the stage, nearly where he had seen the two men. There he encountered a third, who came running toward him from behind the drop—a dark, well-built man, of nearly fifty, clad in a business suit and evidently much excited.

Seeing a revolver in his hand, Nick at first supposed him to be the guilty person, bent upon flight. This impression was instantly dispelled, however, for the stranger, upon nearly colliding with the detective, cried quickly, with a look of relief:

"Great Scott, how lucky! Follow me, Carter. I need help, just such aid as you can give me."

Nick did not notice that his voice, despite his haste and excitement, was somewhat subdued when he mentioned his name. It reached no other ears, nor was either of the two men observed by others; for the throng in each entrance between the wings on that side of the stage had turned toward the scene of the trouble.

Though the man was a stranger to Nick, his immediate recognition and the fact that he carried a drawn revolver now led Nick to suppose he had seen a crime committed and was after the perpetrators. Without hesitation, therefore, he followed him off the stage and toward the entry and stairway mentioned, asking quickly:

"What's wrong? Who are you?"

The man, still hastening on, turned the flap of his vest and displayed a detective's badge, replying quickly:

"Hobey, of the Central Office."

"Central Office!"

"I thought you might know me by sight, though I have been there only a week," Hobey quickly added. "I knew you, all right, and it's dead lucky you're here. Did you see them? They must have fled this way."

"Who?"

"Two men in black."

"I saw two men hurrying out."

"They're the ones," cried Hobey. "If we can't overtake them, I think I know where they'll bolt for cover."

"What's the trouble?" Nick demanded, as they ran down the stairs leading to the stage door and the street.

"Murder and robbery."

"Who has been killed?"

"A man employed by Madame Arconi to watch her dressing room and guard her jewels."

"The devil you say!"

"I've been here in plain clothes for a week, and have seen them every night Arconi sung. He's a foreigner, and can't speak a word of English. He got his to-night, all right. Knifed in the back, and the crooks have got away with Arconi's jewels."

The affair was taking a more definite shape in Nick Carter's mind. Recalling Dupont's fancy for big jewel robberies, and the contemplated crime to which he had referred two months before, together with the fact that he had heard the rascal's voice that very evening, Nick began to feel sure that Dupont was one of the knaves Hobey had seen, and was after.

Madam Arconi's jewels had a world-wide reputation, moreover, and were likely to have inspired Dupont with one of his knavish designs. They had been described by the press, discussed by the public, lauded for advertising purposes; and it had been published broadcast that, in the last act of the opera that evening, she was to wear nearly her entire collection, valued at close upon $250,000.

Having no reason to suspect his companion, who appeared to be stating the facts as rapidly as possible, Nick had felt sure that he could do no better than let Hobey lead the way.

Snapping out the crown of his crush hat, therefore, which he happened to have in his hand when he left his box, Nick had bolted down the stairs and out

of doors with the supposed Central Office man, and without having passed a single person on the way.

The doorkeeper sat at the stage entrance reading. Hobey caught him by the arm and demanded:

"Which way did they go—the two men who just came out?"

The doorkeeper answered quickly, evidently apprehending that something was wrong; but Hobey had claimed his entire attention and he did not so much as glance at Nick.

"That way," he cried, pointing up the street.

"How long ago?"

"Not three minutes."

"Running?"

"Yes, when they got in the street. I happened to be outside. I saw them turn the corner, and think they took a motor car. I heard one leave a moment later."

"Come on!" Hobey cried, with a glance at Nick. "We'll get after them in another car, if there's one out there."

Nick continued to follow him, and both rushed up the street.

It was half-past nine, too early for cabs, cars and carriages to have arrived for departing performers, and only one touring car stood at the opposite curb, some twenty yards away. It contained only a solitary man, occupying the chauffeur's seat, a thin-featured young fellow, muffled in a heavy coat.

With Nick at his heels, Hobey dashed across the street and toward the driver.

"Did two men take a car from here just now?" he asked.

"Yes, sure!" was the reply. "Two men in black. Anything wrong?"

"Yes, murder and robbery."

"Whew!"

"Which way did they go?"

"Out to the avenue and turned north. They had a chauffeur, and got away on the jump. I saw the car waiting on the opposite side, and——"

"You know it by sight, then, and might overtake it," cried Hobey. "If not, I think I know where——"

"Hold on! You can't use this car," protested the chauffeur, as the detective hurriedly opened the door of the tonneau. "It belongs to Doctor Gleason, and he may show up at any moment and——"

"We must use it," Hobey insisted, springing into the car. "We are detectives. I'll take the responsibility and fix it with Gleason. Tumble in here, Carter. I'll explain on the way. Now, young man, get after the other car, or you'll find yourself in trouble."

The chauffeur hesitated, but Nick said, while he banged the door and fastened it:

"He's right, young man. Overtake the car, if possible, and we'll foot the bill. I am Nick Carter, and know Doctor Gleason very well. Get away at once and forget the speed limit."

The chauffeur glanced at Nick's clean-cut, determined face and obeyed without further protest.

In half a minute, and less than five since the flight of the crooks, the car containing the detectives was plunging after them at full speed.

CHAPTER V.

A DOUBLE CRIME.

Before describing what followed Nick Carter's departure from the opera house, it is in order to state what followed his departure from the box in which he had left Chick and their women companions.

Nick had been gone about ten minutes, and then was in the doorway of the next box, as before mentioned, when Chick Carter missed him.

"I wonder where he's gone," he said to himself. "Out to have a smoke, perhaps. His overcoat is here, so he has not gone far."

One of the ladies noticed his vacant chair a minute later, and she glanced inquiringly at Chick.

"Give it up," he said quietly, rightly interpreting her look. "I didn't see him go out."

"Nor I."

"He'll return presently."

Both turned their attention to the stage, to the superb singer then thrilling her hearers with her marvelous art. Both forgot for a time that Nick was absent.

Nearly ten minutes passed, bringing the end of the act and the fall of the curtain.

Presently it was drawn aside in response to the tumultuous applause that shook the great auditorium, and Madam Arconi appeared before it to bow her acknowledgements; and then she withdrew, only to come forth again when the plaudits continued.

Some who were watching her closest at that moment, Chick Carter among them, saw her draw back, as if suddenly startled; saw a frightened expression leap to her face, and then she shrank more hurriedly than before behind the swaying curtain, and disappeared from view.

Despite the continued plaudits, she did not appear again. The tumult gradually subsided. With a general sigh the vast audience relaxed from the tension under which it had been held, and the customary stir and buzz of voices followed.

None in the audience had heard the shriek from the stage, nor the three tragic words that told of the crime committed beyond the lowered curtain.

"Where can Nick have gone?" asked one of the ladies, again turning to Chick with a look of perplexity.

"Blessed if I know," was Chick's reply.

"I didn't see him go out."

"Nor I. He'll be back, I guess."

"He has been gone all of ten minutes."

"Longer, I think," Chick nodded. "Hello! what's the meaning of that?"

A man, one of the managers of the house, had stepped in front of the curtain, and a hush instantly fell upon the house. Advancing to the footlights, he expressed his regrets, and announced that Madam Arconi had been taken suddenly and seriously ill, and that it would be impossible to present the final act of the opera, making it imperative that the audience should be respectfully dismissed.

"By gracious! I thought she didn't look right when she went from before the curtain just now," Chick declared, after the announcement had been made and the crowd was preparing to depart. "I saw her start, and she hurried off as if ill. Her heart must be in bad shape."

The ladies arose and began to put on their wraps.

"I can't see where Mr. Carter has gone," one of them remarked. "It's not like him to desert us in this fashion."

"He'll be here in half a minute," Chick said confidently. "Here's his coat, and he must know the house has been dismissed."

Chick waited in the box about five minutes, but, of course, Nick did not return. The audience had thinned out in the meantime. Only a string of people threading their way up each aisle, and a few scattered ones lingering among the seats, remained of the great throng.

Chick began to feel puzzled. Nick's absence was taking on an unusual significance.

"I'm going down to the smoking room to see if I can find him," he remarked. "He may be down there and possibly does not know that the performance is over."

"Very well. We'll wait here."

Chick left the box; those adjoining it were already deserted. As he stepped into the narrow corridor, the door leading to the stage was hurriedly opened and a policeman appeared on the scene.

"Why, hello, Chick Carter!" he exclaimed, with a look of surprise, at once recognizing the detective.

"Good evening, Dolan."

"Great Scott! Did you have this box to-night?"

"Yes. What of it?"

Chick had detected a strange expression in the officer's eyes, and an inclination to be guarded in his speech, despite the impulsiveness with which he had just spoken.

"Why, nothing special, of course," said Dolan. "Nick isn't with you, is he?"

"He was with us," said Chick, eyeing the man. "He stepped out about twenty minutes ago, and I don't don't know where he has gone."

"Is that so?"

"You haven't seen him, have you?"

"No."

"See here, Dolan, what's on your mind?" Chick abruptly demanded. "What are you doing here, and why do you look like that? Cut loose and make me wise, do you hear?"

Dolan heard, all right, but he did not reveal all he had in his mind, despite his first words.

"To tell the truth," he replied, with a jerk of his thumb in the direction of the stage, "there's been a murder back there."

"A murder!" gasped Chick, at once deciding it might be the occasion of Nick's absence.

"Yes, and a big jewel robbery."

"Who's the victim?"

"A man in Madame Arconi's employ was killed and all her jewels stolen," Dolan answered. "Can't you go back and help investigate it? Dan Foley, the Central Office man, is there; but you're worth half a dozen Foleys. If you say the word, I'll take your ladies out to a carriage, while you go in and have a talk with Foley."

The ladies had appeared at the door of the box, having overheard all that had been said; and the faces of both reflected the surprise and dismay with which they learned of the crime.

"I guess I'd better do so," said Chick, turning to them and referring to Dolan's suggestion. "You'll not mind?"

"No, no, certainly not," one of them said quickly.

"We can easily find our carriage. The officer need not go with us."

"Just as you say."

"We'll go alone."

"It's a hundred to one," Chick added, "that Nick unexpectedly got wise to something wrong, and that he is looking into the matter."

"I think so, too."

"I'll 'phone you at your home a little later, in case we are likely to be detained very long."

The ladies nodded approvingly, and departed.

Chick turned to Dolan, who had been waiting with that same odd light in his eyes, and said a bit brusquely:

"Now, Dolan, I'm with you. Lead the way."

Dolan complied without a word.

The scene on the stage had undergone a change during the ten minutes that had passed since Nick Carter's hurried departure. Performers had been sent to their dressing rooms and ordered to leave the theatre without needless delay. The glittering chorus had disappeared. There remained only a few of the leading vocalists, the usual stage hands, a few of the more persistent visitors—and the one prostrate man whose lips had been sealed with death.

When informed of the crime and the theft of her jewels, Madam Arconi had collapsed and been removed to one of the dressing rooms, where she was lying in a faint.

Two policemen had been hurriedly summoned. Purely by chance, when hastening to the theatre, they had met the Central Office man mentioned, Detective Dan Foley. He had taken immediate charge of the case, beginning an investigation that brought to light a possibility which almost staggered him, and also accounted for the curious expression Chick had detected in Policeman Dolan's eyes.

The nature of Foley's discoveries and misgivings began to appear almost as soon as Chick arrived on the stage. He strode quickly across it, conventionally greeting Foley, who was standing near two of the upper wings, which had been drawn toward the centre of the stage.

Nearly at his feet lay the body of the murdered man, a rugged, dark-featured man of middle age, then ghastly in death. He was lying in a pool of blood, and on the floor near him was a large, double-edged knife, as sharp as a razor and covered with blood.

A few feet from the body was a common wooden chair, also wet with blood, and just to the right of the chair was the door of a single dressing room, opening from the extreme upper right side of the stage, a room designed for the use of the leading female performer, and that night occupied by Madam Arconi.

Chick saw with a glance most of the features mentioned. He was quick to notice, too, in the grave faces of the circle of observers grouped near the scene, the same curious expression already noted in the face of Dolan.

"Well, well, Dan, this is bad business," he said gravely, after their greeting. "Dolan reports a big jewel robbery, as well as this murder."

"Big is no name for it."

"What have you learned?"

"Only a few facts, as yet," Foley rejoined, a bit evasively. "The man is Julius Cauto, an Italian employed by Madam Arconi as an escort to and from the theatre, and as a guardian of her jewels when here. This girl is Lucia Cauto, the man's sister. She serves Madam Arconi as a maid and dresser. Both invariably attend her when at the theatre."

Chick glanced at a slender, dark-eyed girl who was sobbing bitterly nearby, but he at once reverted to the detective.

"Anything more?" he asked tersely. "Who discovered the crime? What is known, or suspected? Come, come, Dan, you seem to be hanging fire. Don't you want me to butt in? If not, say so outright, old man, and I'll hike for home."

Foley quickly shook his head, but his countenance lost none of its gravity.

"Cut that out, Chick, for there's nothing in it," he replied. "I'll tell you in a nutshell all that is definitely known."

"Let it come, then."

"This is Madam Arconi's dressing room," said Foley, pointing. "She left it after dressing for the second act, and she knows nothing about the crime. She was to wear her jewels in the last act. They are kept in a strong leather case, with a handle, made expressly for them, and it then was in a trunk in the farther corner of the room."

"Was the trunk locked?"

"No, it was not. Madam Arconi's costume for the second act had been taken out of it, and was to be replaced when she returned, and the maid did not lock it."

"I saw no need of it," Miss Cauto put in, amid sobs and tears. "My big brother, Julius, who always protects——"

"That will do, my girl," Foley quickly interposed, though not unkindly. "I will state the case."

"Pardon, sir."

"It appears," Foley went on, "that this girl, after laying out a few articles wanted for the next act, not including the jewel case, came out of the room and went down between the second and third wings, where she is accustomed to wait for her mistress and assist her to her dressing room when she comes from the stage. From that position the girl could not see the door of this room."

"I follow you," Chick nodded, noting the location mentioned.

"She left her brother, however, seated in this chair close beside the door. That was his custom, also, that it should be impossible for any one to enter the dressing room unseen by him. There is no window in the room, nor any other way of entering it."

"I understand."

"Cauto was not asleep, but was as vigilant as usual, the girl states; for she spoke to him when leaving the room, merely to be sure he knew it was vacant, and he replied that he would be watchful."

"I see."

"Those, so far as is known, were his last words. Six or eight minutes later, just as the curtain was falling, the girl stepped from between the wings and glanced toward the room. She saw Cauto's body pitched back in his chair, with his hands hanging lax beside him. She thought he looked unnatural, and she ran and grasped him by the shoulder, calling him by name."

"He was dead?"

"Yes. Stabbed in the back, as you see," nodded Foley. "When the girl touched him, the body pitched forward upon the floor, about as it lies. She shrieked for help, and several persons responded immediately. It was found a moment later that the trunk in the dressing room was open and the case of jewels missing. There you have it, Chick, in a nutshell."

CHAPTER VI.

NICK UNDER SUSPICION.

Chick Carter's gaze lingered for a moment on Foley's grave face; it still wore an expression he could not fathom. Instead of attempting to do so, he glanced sharply toward the dressing room, which was nearly opposite the drop-scene and the passage between it and the rear wall of the stage, through which Nick had seen Detective Hobey approach.

Observing that Foley showed an inclination to be questioned, or to let Chick express an opinion, or question others, Chick at once proceeded to do so.

It was apparent, too, that other observers were not averse to this, for his identity and relations with Nick Carter had been whispered from one to another, and, aside from his reputation as a detective, all were very willing, for reasons presently to appear, to hear what Chick would have to say.

He began with Lucia Cauto, saying rather abruptly:

"Be careful, my girl, that you are correct in what you state; if you are not sure, say so frankly, that you may not unintentionally mislead me. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," said the girl, striving to govern her agitation.

"It was about ten minutes before the end of the act that you left the dressing room."

"Nearly that, sir."

"Was it then as light as now in this corner of the stage?"

"No, sir, it was not," Miss Cauto replied. "These wings in four and five were set farther this way and at an angle, leaving a much narrower passage between them and the wall, also cutting off much of the light from the middle of the stage."

"Was it dark in the passage back of the drop?"

"Not at all dark, sir, but not as light as on the stage. It was light enough to see plainly."

"Did you see any person near the dressing room, or back of the drop when you left the room?"

"Only Julius, my brother," said the girl, pointing to the body.

"Were any of the performers, or any persons, between these upper wings?"

"No, sir. The wings were so set that the stage could not be seen from here. There were some men, evidently visitors, standing between the wings in front, but all of them were watching the performers. I saw nobody in the passage when I looked back to see if Julius was here."

"It's very evident, Foley, that the crook got in his work just before the end of the act, when the chorus was on and the scene approaching its climax, a time when the attention of everybody would be fixed upon them."

"I guess that's right," Foley said.

"It appears, too, that this corner of the stage was somewhat shut out of view by the upper wings, if they were set at an angle. Am I right, Miss Cauto?"

"Yes, sir, that is right."

"Your brother was seated in this chair, you say, when you left the room?"

"Yes, sir."

"Be careful, now," said Chick. "Can you state positively whether the chair then was close to the wall?"

"It was, sir; I am sure of that," said the girl. "The back of it was touching the wall."

"Why are you so sure of it?"

"Because I attempted to lay my hand on the back of it, when I bent over to speak to Julius, and I could not slip my fingers between the back and the wall."

"Ah, very good," Chick nodded. "Here's a point, Foley, to be remembered."

"What's that?"

"This man was stabbed in the back, which could not have been done by a man behind him unless he left the chair, or moved it out from the wall."

"That's true enough."

"It is not probable that he was standing when stabbed, however, for it would have required two or three persons to have sustained a man of his weight, and kept him from falling heavily, which would surely have been heard. I do not think there were more than two men in the job."

"Why so?"

"Because if three or more strangers had come near Cauto, he naturally would have been put on his guard, in which case he could not have been attacked without some disturbance. He would have called for help, or put up a fight."

"Well, there's something in that," Foley allowed.

"There can have been no great struggle, or it would have been heard," Chick proceeded to argue. "The chair still is close to the wall, indicating that Cauto could not have been struck directly from behind. There are only two plausible explanations of the blow."

"Namely?"

"One, that Cauto was approached by some man whom he supposed to be a friend, and of whom he had no suspicion, but who contrived to cause him to turn sufficiently in the chair for the knife to be quickly and forcibly used."

"H'm. I see," Foley nodded, still with that odd expression in his eyes. "What's your other explanation?"

"This," said Chick. "If Cauto was approached by two strangers, who may have pretended to be only about to pass him, one of them might have diverted his attention in some way, or have caused him to lean forward, enabling the other to quickly use the knife from one side."

"That's reasonable, also."

"The job must have been very quickly and skillfully done," Chick added. "Have you questioned anybody else, or has any one volunteered any information? Were any persons seen hurriedly leaving, or carrying a parcel that might have been the jewel case?"

These questions opened the way for Foley to relieve his mind.

"Yes, I have learned a few facts," he replied. "There were two men seen on the opposite side of the stage about five minutes before the murder was committed. Both were seen to pass back of the drop and come in this direction."

"Were they members of the company, or employed here?"

"No. Both were in street attire, barring their overcoats."

"Are they known?"

Foley did not answer the question. Instead, as if he had not heard it, he continued quickly:

"The two men left by the stage door immediately after the act ended, and they were followed by two others about three minutes later, just as the crime was discovered. The doorkeeper at the stage entrance from the court below saw all four of them. His name is Magee, and his statements shed considerable light on the case."

"You have questioned him?"

"Yes."

"What does he tell?"

"He was on the steps just outside of the door when the men came out," said Foley. "The first two hurried by him and began to run when they got in the street. He thinks they fled in an automobile, but is not positive about that. The other two came out in about three minutes. One of them asked if two men had just gone, and whether they were running. When told that they were, both rushed after them and quickly disappeared around the corner of the street. Magee heard of the crime a couple of minutes later, and he stated these facts to me when I came into the theatre. He is here to verify them, if you like."

Chick glanced at the doorkeeper, who was standing nearby; also at a tall, well-dressed man whom he knew by sight, and who evidently was only a visitor there—Arthur Haynes, a wealthy Wall Street broker.

Wondering again at the odd expression on the face of each, Chick began to have an intuitive feeling that there was something not yet disclosed, something that

was being withheld for some reason. He glanced sharply from one to the other, and asked a bit curtly, addressing the doorkeeper:

"Did you know either of the four men, Mr. Magee? It appears very evident that two, if not all of them, must have committed the crime."

"I haven't the slightest doubt of that," Foley put in bluntly. "No other persons left the stage until after the crime was discovered, and they were well known and do not warrant suspicion."

"Well, I am not sure about one of them," said Magee, replying to Chick's question. "I know him only by a description given by this gentleman, who says he saw him shortly before he came out. He was in a dress suit and wore a crush hat, and I saw him quite plainly."

"The man to whom he refers, Mr. Carter," Mr. Haynes now said grimly, "was your associate in business, Nick Carter."

"Nick!" Chick exclaimed, in surprise, yet with eyes lighting. "Well, well, that explains his absence. I missed him from our box ten minutes before the act ended. He must have got wise to something, Foley, and he probably has gone in pursuit of the criminals."

"That can't be," Foley quickly asserted, with a growl.

"Can't be!" echoed Chick, staring at him. "Why not?"

"Because he was one of the two who first went out, the two who bolted as if in flight when they neared the street. Nobody had left by the stage door for half an hour before then."

"There must be some mistake, then," Chick said. "The man could not have been Nick."

"On the contrary," said Haynes, "I am very sure it was Nick. I am well acquainted with him, and spoke to him just before he went back of the drop with another man and came toward this side of the stage. It must have been he, for he nodded when I called him by name, and then responded to my greeting."

"Have you seen him since?" asked Chick.

"No."

"And you are sure he came this way?"

"Of course," said Haynes, smiling faintly. "I saw him plainly enough."

"And he was one of the two men who first came out?" Chick demanded, again addressing Magee.

"Yes, sir, sure!" declared the latter. "I noticed him in particular, for his face was turned toward me. I'd swear he was the man described by this gentleman."

Chick Carter was puzzled, but he did not yet dream of what his observers had in mind. It would have seemed altogether too absurd. He stood frowning with perplexity for a moment, then turned to Foley and said bluntly:

"There's something very strange about this. Why should Nick, if it was he, have gone out in advance of the other two men, to say nothing of bolting in an automobile? That was two or three minutes, as I understand it, before the crime was discovered."

"Well, in a way," Foley answered grimly. "He must have known, however, that the crime had been committed."

"Known!" cried Chick. "Nonsense! How can he have known it? That's absurd! If he had known it, Foley, he would have given the alarm at once, and probably have stayed right here to look into the case. Known it—that's all rot!"

"No, it's not."

"What do you mean by that?"

"I'll tell you what I mean," he said, a bit grimly. "I did not know who occupied the first of the floor boxes on the left of the stage, when I sent Dolan out to ascertain and to bring in here any persons who might be found in it. He did not explain matters to you, when he found it had been occupied by Nick and his party, including yourself. He left that for me to do."

"See here, Foley," Chick's voice grew suddenly cold and hard, "what are you driving at?"

"Somebody who was in that box, presumably Nick himself, knew all about this murder before it was discovered by Miss Cauto."

"But——"

"There aren't any buts," Foley insisted. "I have almost absolute proof of it."

"What kind of proof?" Chick growled incredulously, with a sharper gleam from under his drooping brows.

"Nick's party had the box alone, didn't he?"

"Yes, certainly."

"No stranger was in it?"

"No. Our party consisted of four persons."

"To whom did the usher give the coupons torn from the tickets when he conducted you to the box?"

"To Nick."

"Are you sure of it?"

"Yes, of course. I saw him slip them into his vest pocket."

"Have a look at this one," said Foley, extending a square white coupon in his hand. "It bears the date of this evening and is for that particular box."

Chick gazed at it a while without speaking. There was no denying the facts alleged. There was the coupon, the date, the box—all in black and white.

"Where did you get it, Foley?"

"I picked it up a few feet from this body, just at the entrance of that passage running back of the flat."

Chick gazed again, saying nothing, but trying desperately to hit upon some theory consistent with the mystifying circumstances.

Not a sound came from the circle of observers. They were as mute as if turned to stone. The eyes of one and all were fixed upon the perplexed, frowning face of Nick Carter's chief assistant.

"It does look, Foley, as if Nick had been here," Chick at length admitted. "But it may have been before the murder was committed, or——"

"No, it was not," Foley again interrupted.

"Why do you say so?"

"Because there is a stain of blood on the back of the coupon, obviously left there by a soiled thumb or finger," said Foley, quickly turning the coupon and displaying its bloodstained back.

"I am the one who found it, and this stain was on it when I picked it up," Foley went on. "Only a man with bloodstained fingers can have dropped it. Such evidence admits of only one interpretation. The coupon was, you yourself have stated, in Nick's vest pocket. Plainly, then, his hand must have been soiled with blood, and, thrusting his fingers into his vest pocket for some purpose, he inadvertently drew out and dropped one of the four coupons. He must have known, then, all about the murder several minutes before Miss Cauto discovered it, as I have repeatedly asserted."

Foley's voice had taken on a sinister ring. His eyes had a gleam of assurance that cut Chick Carter to the quick. He knew that in police circles, as in every vocation, jealousy frequently finds a foothold. Chick understood, now, the look on Dolan's face, the meaning of Foley's earlier reticence, the significance of the mute stare of all observers.

"Great Scott!" he cried, as if staggered by the very absurdity of what suddenly had dawned upon him. "You don't mean to imply that Nick had a hand in this affair? You haven't gone daffy, Foley, have you? You're not bonehead enough to suspect Nick Carter of being a murderer!"

Foley's grizzled brows knit closer.

"I'm not inclined to say what I suspect at this stage of the investigation," he retorted. "Evidence of this kind speaks for itself. It can't be ignored. We must hew close to the line and let the chips fall where they may. The circumstances already discovered are of equal weight. You don't appear to know where Nick was for ten minutes before the murder, nor able to offer any explanation of his conduct and absence. Until you can, I must measure this case on the strength of the evidence and the circumstances, as I measure others, and I must handle it in the same way. There's nothing else to be done."

"Yes, that's right, Foley," Chick answered, with mock acquiescence. "You go ahead and handle it, then, in your own way; but I'll hang round here to be sure you make no more mistakes. You can bet your life on that."

"Do as you like about it."

"Nick Carter a criminal!" Chick added impetuously. "Could any idea be more absurd? I wouldn't have believed that a sane man could have thought of such a thing, to say nothing of believing it."

CHAPTER VII.

CHICK CARTER MYSTIFIED.

Very few persons would have disagreed with Chick Carter, in that no sane man would believe Nick Carter guilty of a crime.

As Detective Foley asserted, however, evidence must be taken at its face value, and in a murder case it cannot be ignored.

The following day brought no sign of Nick Carter, moreover, and his continued absence added weight to the misgivings already entertained in some quarters.

Though Chick and all of Nick's household were greatly mystified and worried, they knew, of course, that he had had no hand in the crime; that he was either engaged upon the case under circumstances precluding his communicating with them, or was a victim of an amazingly well-designed and executed plot.

Urged upon by Chick, who wanted every atom of obtainable evidence as quickly as possible, there was a noteworthy inquiry held at police headquarters at noon that day. It included all of the witnesses who had testified at the theatre the previous night, as well as others having information to impart, who had been

discovered through the energetic efforts of Foley and several other Central Office men.

Each was questioned separately by the chief, in the presence of Foley, Chick Carter, and Patsy Garvan, and each was commanded to disclose nothing to any of the others. As the details of this inquest would impose much repetition, however, only a brief summary is here essential.

On a table near the chief's desk were about dozen photographs, all of men, including one of Nick, brought there for the purpose of testing some of the witnesses.

The first was the usher employed in the theatre, a young man named Page, who testified to having given Nick the four coupons torn from his tickets, after conducting the party to his box. He also identified the bloodstained coupon as one of the four.

Following him, Madam Arconi testified to the theft of her famous jewels, providing the chief with a list of the same, and also to the irreproachable character of Cauto and his sister, Lucia, both of whom had been in her employ for a number of years. She could, however, impart no facts bearing upon the execution of the crime, nor in any way suggesting the identity of the criminal.

Lucia Cauto, as well as Haynes, the Wall Street broker, repeated their statements of the previous night. The latter positively insisted that he not only had spoken to Nick and received a reply indicating that no mistake had been made, but also had seen him going with another man, a stranger to Haynes, into the passage back of the flat and toward Madam Arconi's dressing room.

Following that came three of the stage hands, each of whom picked out Nick's photograph from among the others, and each testified to having seen him on the stage fully ten minutes before the murder was discovered. Neither could assert anything more definite, however, concerning his movements while there.

Magee, the doorkeeper, was the next one summoned. Though he had not noticed Nick when the latter hurried out through the stage door with Hobey, as already set forth, he identified Nick's photograph without a moment's hesitation, and positively declared that he was one of the two men who first left the stage, who ran out to the street and, he thought, fled in an automobile.

On top of this amazing testimony, which, of course, was incorrect, came that of a young man who, approaching the stage door a few moments before the murder, had seen two men rush out and cross the street, who sprang into a waiting car and had a few words with the chauffeur, who then drove away at great speed. This witness was a bank clerk named Kenyon, whom Detective Foley had ferreted out early that morning.

Chick Carter, who had started in to prove the case to be one of mistaken identity, and who vainly had attempted to shake the testimony of the several witnesses, questioned Kenyon as follows:

"Do you know precisely what time it was when you saw the two men?"

"No, not exactly," was the reply. "It was about half-past nine."

"Did you see more than one automobile near the stage door?"

"No, sir, only one. If there had been more I should have seen them."

"Did you see one that might have departed two or three minutes before?"

"No, sir; there was only one car in sight. I'm sure of that."

"Did you remain in that locality?"

"I did not. I was on my way home, and did not linger."

"Did you see two men running, either before or after the departure of the car?"

"No, sir. I saw the two men rush out of the stage door and enter the car just as I turned the corner from the avenue. Except them and the chauffeur, I think I was the only person on the street in that locality. I glanced at the stage door as I passed it, and saw a man standing on the steps."

"That was the doorkeeper," said Chick, steadily becoming more perplexed by the corroborative testimony heard on all sides. "You heard no men come from the stage door after you walked on?"

"I did not, nor did I see any."

"Did you see the face of either of the men who entered the car?"

"I saw one, though not very plainly. He was in evening clothes and without an overcoat, which led me to notice him particularly. He was a well-built man and wore no beard or mustache. I saw that much when he bent forward and spoke a few words to the chauffeur."

"Could you hear what was said?"

"No, sir."

"Did you notice the number on the auto?"

"I did not."

"Look at these photographs on the table and see if

you can find one resembling the man you have described."

Kenyon bowed and complied, glancing quickly from one to another. The instant his eyes fell upon that of Nick Carter, he picked up the photograph and turned to Chick.

"That's the man," he said. "I'll bet money to marbles on it."

"But the doorkeeper at the stage entrance, Mr. Kenyon, states that two men left the theatre and rushed out of the court within three minutes after the departure of the two in an automobile," said Chick. "How happened it that you did not see them?"

"That's not strange, sir. I must have walked nearly a block in three minutes, and most likely would not have heard or seen them."

"That's all," said Chick.

Kenyon bowed and withdrew from the room.

He had stated only the truth; he had seen Nick and Hobey depart in the car. But he had not seen the two who fled in a car three minutes before them.

Hence, the curious complication—and Chick Carter's perplexity.

Chick sat in grim silence during the testimony of several more witnesses, the last of whom was a physician who had been called to the theatre the previous night. He stated that, in his opinion, Cauto had been stabbed while seated in his chair, that he must have been leaning forward when the blow was delivered; and the blade of the knife having penetrated his heart, in all probability, caused almost instant death, or a condition reasonably precluding any outcry.

Chick examined the bloodstained weapon, which had been brought to the chief's office, but he could find nothing pointing to the identity of the criminal. Not until the physician had departed, and Foley left the office to dismiss the numerous visitors, did Chick break his silence, asking abruptly:

"Well, chief, what do you make of it?"

"I hardly know what to make of it," was the reply.

"You don't, of course, think Nick had a hand in the job?"

"Certainly not. The public, however, when this circumstantial evidence becomes generally known, is very likely to regard it of some weight," the chief added significantly.

"Perhaps so."

"There are plenty of people, you know, who are ready and eager to make the worst of things, and who are malicious enough to have a hammer out the moment an opportunity presents itself. The sensational newspapers, also, have a leaning that way."

"Very true, I'll admit."

"We know, of course, that Nick is incapable of crime."

"Yes, sure thing."

"Nevertheless, there are many who would be very willing to knock him," added the chief. "They will compare him with the trusted bank cashier, who, though a pillar of the church and superintendent of the Sunday School, perhaps, is suddenly found to be half a million short in his accounts. They will say that Nick Carter, even, might have gone wrong for jewels valued at a quarter of a million."

"That's right, chief," Chick said soberly. "I can almost see it coming."

"There seems to be no reasonable doubt that the murder was committed by one of the four men seen hurrying away by Magee."

"I think so."

"If Nick had been one of the last two leaving, we should reasonably assume that he had received an inkling of the crime, at least, and was in pursuit of the other two. That theory is knocked on the head, however, by the fact that he was one of the first two to go."

"That's true," Chick nodded dubiously, no longer even dreaming that it was false. "I'll be hanged if I can imagine, on the other hand, who the two men were who followed him and his companion, and asked Magee if they were running."

"The whole affair is deucedly mysterious."

"Mysterious or not, chief, I'm going to the bottom of it," Chick forcibly declared, with a bang of his fist on the table. "Nick had some good reason for leaving our box, and there's some good reason for his conduct and absence. I'm going after that reason, too, and you can bet your boots I'll find it."

"Good! I hope you succeed."

"Do you object to my taking this coupon, chief, if I'll be sure to return it safely?"

"No, I think not, Chick."

"Thank you. I want it for a day or two. If Foley gets wise to anything more, chief, I wish you'd let me know."

"I will do so at once."

Chick thanked him with a nod, then signed for Patsy to follow.

Together, mystified beyond telling, they passed out into the sunlit street.

CHAPTER VIII.

FACE TO FACE.

In no sense was Nick Carter lame in yielding to the suggestions of Detective Hobey, so alleged, who had picked him up almost the moment he had appeared on the stage that fateful night, asserting that he was a Central Office man, displaying a badge in confirmation of it, and intimating that he knew all about the double crime and where the criminals might be run to cover, in case they could not be overtaken.

Nick would have felt, in fact, that he was losing a golden opportunity to catch the crooks if he had shaped any other course than that which he had taken.

That he was up against a very clever rascal, a most amazing subterfuge, a knave who never saw the interior of the Central Office, unless under arrest, and who was coöperating that evening with Gaston Dupont in one of the most complex and dastardly undertakings of his long criminal career—such possibilities did not enter Nick Carter's head.

After entering the automobile, Nick found a heavy overcoat on the seat of the tonneau, and he quickly slipped into it, remarking to the chauffeur:

"I suppose this is Doctor Gleason's coat?"

"Yes, sir," nodded the chauffeur over his shoulder. "He stopped to call on a patient and left the coat outside."

"I'll make use of it, then. A dress suit is a bit light for this kind of work."

"That's all right, sir."

"Now, Hobey, cough up what points you know bearing on this affair," said Nick, turning to the supposed Central Office man. "How did you happen to see the crooks?"

Hobey was bowed forward to the front seat, eagerly gazing up the avenue into which the car had turned and was speeding north, as if he hoped to discover the fleeing automobile in the distance. Without moving from his position, he answered with the readiness of one whose story had been previously prepared:

"I saw them nearly an hour before the murder. I didn't know they were crooks, of course, but supposed they were merely privileged visitors on the stage."

"Did you see the crime committed?"

"No. It was discovered by a girl employed by Madam Arconi."

"Where were you?"

"I was down in the right wings when she screamed. I bolted up the stage when I saw the body of the murdered man, who was on guard at Arconi's dressing-room door, and I caught a glimpse of an open trunk in her room and knew that her jewels must have been stolen."

"A natural inference," said Nick.

"I left the body to be looked after by others," Hobey continued, "and rushed through the passage back of the drop in pursuit of the crooks. I knew that was the only way they could have gone, and that they must have fled by the way of the stage entrance, not being likely to have gone through the auditorium."

"Surely not. Furthermore, if they had gone that way, I should have seen them. I was in the passage leading from the stage in that direction."

"Luckily I met you just as I came from behind the drop-scene," said Hobey; "and together we may land them. I wanted one good man with me, for the rascals must be armed and out for blood, if driven into a corner. Got a revolver with you?"

"No," said Nick. "I brought none to-night."

"Here, take one of mine," said Hobey, drawing one from his pocket and slipping it into Nick's hand. "You may find it useful if we come to a scrap with them."

Nick accepted it, but did not examine it to see if it was loaded. He would have thought himself a fool to have supposed it was not.

Nevertheless, there was not a cartridge in it. The giving of it was only a move made by Hobey to convince Nick that he was "on the level," in case any misgivings existed, and the trick very likely would have proved successful had Nick felt any doubts, none of which he then entertained.

"We'll find a way to floor them, all right, if we can locate them," he said. "How did you get a line on where they have gone?"

"That happened in this way," Hobey glibly explained, still gazing ahead while the car sped on. "I was standing near one of the wings during the first act, and I saw the two men step back of it to get a better view of the stage. While they stood there, not having observed me, I heard one of them say: 'Where shall we go after it's done?' "

"Yes. And then?"

"I supposed, of course, that he referred to the opera," said Hobey. "The other replied: 'We'll bolt for Grady's house, of course.' "

"I see," Nick nodded.

"The first speaker then asked: 'Are you sure of the number?' Then the other replied that he was dead sure, and he did me the favor to mention the street and number," Hobey said pointedly. "I thought nothing about it at that time, Nick, nor even after I saw

both men on the opposite side of the stage, near Madam Arconi's dressing room. I did not dream that a murder and robbery would be attempted at such a time. When I did know, however, it became a cinch that the crooks were the two I had seen and overheard."

"I guess you're right, Hobey," Nick said thoughtfully. "What is the address you overheard?"

Hobey mentioned one that Nick knew must be in the Harlem district and nearly over to the East River, and he fell to sizing up the course best to be taken in case they did not overtake the car containing the crooks. He knew it would be only a very few minutes, at the rate of speed they were going, before they should reach the street mentioned.

In the meantime Hobey remained bowed over the front seat, gazing steadfastly ahead and muttering an occasional remark, or word of instruction, to the chauffeur.

It was nearly ten o'clock when, far ahead of them, all three saw the rear lights of a swiftly moving car, just as it left the avenue and turned east. The rapidity with which it swept around the corner and vanished was, under the circumstances, too significant to be ignored.

"By thunder!" Hobey cried, with a glance at Nick. "I'll bet a thousand to one that's the car we are after."

"We'll soon see," replied Nick. "Turn east a block this side of the street it took, driver, and run at the top of your speed."

"Yes, and get pulled in, mebbe," growled the chauffeur.

"I'll prevent that, all right," replied Nick. "You do what we say."

"All right, sir. It's up to you."

"What's your idea in taking the street a block this side?" asked Hobey.

"Because our lights may alarm the rascals, if seen immediately after we turn the corner, and they may have a good enough car to give us the slip."

"There's something in that."

"We'll head them off by taking the street running parallel with the one they are on," Nick added. "The house you have mentioned must be nearly over to the river, and if the car we have just seen stops in front of it, we shall know it contains our game."

"That's right."

"Instead of running into that street with our car, we'll stop just around the nearest corner to the house, and foot it to the other car. We then may nail the rascals easily, provided they are there, before our purpose is even suspected."

"By Jove! that's a good idea," cried Hobey.

"Let her go, driver," commanded Nick. "Crowd her to the limit."

The plan he had suggested suited Hobey to the letter, and was nearly in a line with what he had expected. Some five minutes had passed when the car swerved north again, and soon came to a quick stop a few yards from the first corner.

"Quietly, now," said Nick, as all three sprang out. "Unless I'm much mistaken the house should be in this block. Let me have a look."

He stole quickly to the corner and peered around it—into a somewhat quiet street, flanked on both sides with blocks of plain brick dwellings. There were no pedestrians in sight, nor any sign of a policeman; no probability, in fact, of any chance observer.

The scheme of Gaston Dupont had been planned to a nicety and executed to a dot.

About thirty feet around the corner, directly in front of the third house of the block around which he peered, Nick discovered a motionless automobile, evidently having arrived at the curbing only a few moments before.

A man in a tall hat and carrying what appeared to be a leather suit case, was at that moment entering the house.

Nick saw him for an instant only, in the glow shed out from the lighted hall.

The other two occupants of the car were just alighting, as if to follow the first, and Nick lost not a moment.

"Ready with your gun, Hobey, if needed," he whispered, slipping that given him into his side pocket.

"I'll be ready, all right."

"Don't use it unless I say the word. We must get into the house. One of them has just entered with a grip, very likely containing the stolen jewels."

"Go it," muttered Hobey, who, also, had peered around the corner. "I'm with you."

"Come on, then, as if we were not paying any particular attention to them."

Accompanied on either side by his companions, Nick turned the corner and walked toward the car, as if they had no interest in it and their coming was only a matter of chance.

The two men had crossed the sidewalk and were at the bottom of the steps, directly in the glare of light from the open door of the house, when the three came opposite to them.

Nick saw at a glance that there was nobody in the lighted hall, and he acted on the instant. Whipping

out the revolver given him, he thrust it under the very nose of the stranger, both of whom had turned and paused on the lowest step.

"Not a sound from you fellows," he said firmly. "One yelp and I'll silence you with a bullet."

"Great Scott!" gasped one, as if greatly alarmed.

Then, like a flash, the hands of both men went into the air. Even this, also, was a move made only to blind Nick.

"Watch them, Hobey," he whispered sharply, observing that Hobey also had drawn his revolver. "I'll get after their running mate, who just went in."

"Go it, old man! I've got these mugs covered."

Nick darted up the steps and into the deserted hall, then moved quickly toward the door of a lighted back room. Hearing no disturbance from outside, he was too intent upon what lay before him to glance back.

All four men, each with a drawn revolver, had crept after him up the steps and into the hall, and one was noiselessly closing the door.

At the same moment, while the detective was about six feet away, the figure of a man appeared at the door of the back room.

Nick Carter could hardly believe his own eyes.

For an instant he thought he was looking, not at a man framed in an open doorway—but in a mirror.

In face and figure, the man was a counterfeit likeness of—the detective himself!

In the hundredth part of a second Nick realized that he was the victim of a trick, that danger lurked back of it, and his revolver leaped to a level with the other's breast.

"Hands up!" he cried. "Move foot or finger and I'll drop you!"

The man in the doorway did not move for a few seconds—but he spoke.

"Don't be foolish, my dear Carter," he advised, with mocking assurance. "The weapon you hold is not loaded. My good friend Hobey would not have been so absurdly lame as to give you one you can use."

"Have I been stung?" was the question that flashed through Nick's mind.

"Besides, if you were to shoot me, you would instantly be killed by others," the man went on. "There are no less than four good friends of mine behind you, each covering you with a loaded weapon. Yours is empty, however. That you may have proof of it without venturing to look, observe that I now take out my own revolver, despite your threat, and politely invite you to throw up your hands. Have you forgotten, my dear Carter, that I told you I would, sooner or later—put it all over you? That time has come!"

With a backward glance that confirmed all that he had heard, Nick Carter stood listening with scarcely a change of countenance—and with weapon lowered.

Not until that moment had he had any reasonable occasion to suspect that he was being made the victim of a plot.

But he now saw that the man who thus addressed him, who looked so like him, a veritable genius in the art of impersonation, was none other than Gaston Dupont.

"Take a tip, my dear Carter, and obey," Dupont added, with icy significance, raising his revolver. "Throw up your hands—that's right! You relieve me of a disagreeable job. Now, two of you, house those cars without delay. Three of us will be ample, under the circumstances, to look after this master sleuth. Fit him with bracelets, Desmond, and make sure they fit tight."

CHAPTER IX.

IN THE TOILS.

"What do you mean, Dupont, by asserting that you will put it all over me?"

The question came from Nick Carter half an hour after he was held up so unexpectedly in the house in Harlem.

He was seated in a basement room, in a wooden chair near one of the walls. His wrists were confined in handcuffs, his arms secured behind him to the back of the chair, his feet and ankles tied fast to the legs of it. In so far as escape and resistance were concerned, he was absolutely powerless.

With him were the five men by whom he had been so artfully ensnared—Dupont, Hobey, the man addressed as Desmond, and the drivers of the two cars. One of them was named Fenno, or so Nick had heard him called; the other, Gilley. They had returned from disposing of their cars only a few minutes before.

The five men were seated near a bare wooden table in the middle of the room. Lying upon it was a strong, sole-leather case of considerable size, with a stout handle, the same that had been stolen from the dressing room of Madam Arconi that evening, and which had been made expressly to contain her famous jewels.

An oil lamp burned in a bracket on one of the walls. Its yellow rays shed a sallow light over the dismal scene and upon the faces of the several men.

That of Dupont had resumed its normal appearance.

It had been divested of the means by which he had, with consummate art, so changed his mobile, clean-cut features into a likeness of Nick Carter that he had successfully passed ordinary inspection. He now looked unusually white and stern, with a cruel coldness in his sinister eyes, though his expression was one of mingled relief and malevolent exultation.

Desmond was a darker man, also clad in a dress suit, and Nick detected in his shifty eyes an expression nearly always found in those of the habitual criminal.

On the sleeve of Desmond's coat was a dark smudge of blood, and Nick had noticed like stains on one of Dupont's wristbands, from which the cuff had been removed and disposed of—sufficient evidence, indeed, that these were the two men responsible for the murder of Julius Cauto.

Dupont sat gazing across the table at Nick, and none of the others ventured replying to Nick's question. At length Dupont answered:

"You know what I mean," he said coldly.

"I know only what you say," Nick returned. "Ordinarily, what you say is not worthy of much belief. In view of what has occurred, however, and the situation in which I find myself, I am compelled to give some weight to your words. Your jugglery of things to-night, I'll admit, has fooled me."

Dupont indulged in a low, mirthless laugh.

"You name it well," he replied, with sinister complancency. "Only a master of the art of deception could do what I to-night have accomplished."

Nick smiled grimly. "Dupont," he said, "what's your game?"

"Have you forgotten the visit I paid you two months ago?"

"No."

"Nor the prediction I then made?"

"Call it by its right name—a threat."

"Either will serve," said Dupont, with a sardonic smile. "I made you an offer at that time, Carter, which you refused to accept. I was willing to bury the past and let bygones be bygones; willing to let you go your way, provided you would let me go mine."

"Yes, I recall it," Nick said.

"I did even more, Carter," Dupont added, with a sinister nod. "I offered you half a million dollars if you would cease persecuting me and let me continue my vocation unmolested."

"And I refused even to consider it," Nick put in bluntly. "Make me the same offer here and now, you rascal, and I will again refuse it."

Dupont laughed coldly, a laugh echoed by chuckles of contempt from his listening confederates.

"Having you on the hip, my dear Carter, I am not in a mood to repeat my munificent offer," he said, with a sneer. "I am, rather, in the mood I was when we parted. I then told you I would no longer endure your persecutions; that you were becoming an intolerable annoyance, a dangerous menace; that our relations were such that one of us must go to the wall, down and out forever."

"Yes, I remember it," Nick said indifferently.

"I told you that it should not be me, that you should be the victim, that I would find a way to down you," Dupont went on. "I warned you, Carter, that I would let you have it good and hard, that I would put it all over you—and I to-night have done it?"

"What have you done?"

"The last thing you would have anticipated."

"What is that?"

"Put you in my shoes."

"Your shoes?"

"Placed upon your shoulders the criminal garment long worn over mine. I have invested you with the cloak of guilt."

"I don't understand," said Nick.

"I have turned you into the man you persecuted, the thing you have scorned, the transgressor you have risked life itself to run down. I have made you a criminal."

Nick laughed derisively.

"I guess not," he exclaimed. "You are a clever crook, Dupont, but not quite a magician. None of that josh goes with me."

Dupont shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"Wait and see," he rejoined.

"See what?" questioned Nick, wondering at the rascal's assurance.

"The newspapers of to-morrow."

"What about them?"

"I will wager that most of them will, in terms more or less conclusive and severe, attribute to you the crime this night committed," Dupont answered. "Before a week shall have passed, with no word from you, no denial of the charge, all will have fallen in line. In the meantime, Carter, you shall be eternally silenced, and your name shall go down to posterity—as black as my own!"

"Ah! That's your game, eh?"

"In part," Dupont nodded. "I warned you that I would strike when you least expected it, that I would

deliver a blow you could not guard. You are soon to learn in how far I have made good."

A darker frown, one that neither scorn for threats nor the imminence of personal peril could have called up, was settling on Nick Carter's face. He knew with what virulence Dupont could hate, what treachery could inspire him, and of what artifices he was capable.

"Made good, eh?" Nick growled inquiringly. "What sort of a trick have you performed?"

"I already have told you."

"In enigmas only. I am not good at guessing."

"I have supposed it was your forte to ferret out the mysterious," Dupont sneered coldly. "I have overrated you."

"It doesn't matter. Go on with your tale."

"I long have had a fancy for Madam Arconi's jewels," continued Dupont, with a wave of his hand toward the leather case on the table. "Aside from their perfect purity and rare beauty, they have an intrinsic value that long has appealed to me strongly."

"No doubt; theft is your trade."

"I saw them in Vienna four years ago, and in London two years later; but the opportunities abroad for one of my vocation do not compare with those presented in your American theatres. I have spent two months in looking over the ground and laying my plans. To-night they have been successfully executed."

"Also including, evidently, a rascally design upon me," said Nick.

"Precisely," Dupont mockingly bowed, while a laugh broke from his associates. "Seeing a way by which to accomplish it, my dear Carter, I could not resist incorporating you in my scheme, as well as incriminating you."

Nick glared at him across the table, and Dupont quickly added, addressing Desmond:

"That he may see how well we have succeeded, which may convince him that my predictions regarding him are equally well founded, open this leather case, Desmond, and allow him to view its contents. I think you can force the lock with your knife."

"If I can't, Dupont, there'll be something wrong with the cards," cried Desmond, hastening to obey.

Nick Carter watched in silence, as well as the others.

It took Desmond only a very few minutes to break the lock, and he then spread the case open on the table.

It brought to view numerous smaller plush and Russia leather boxes, neatly packed within, all of which Desmond hastened to open and lay out in plain sight of all.

The light from the bracket lamp fell upon jewels and gems that would baffle description—diamonds, rubies, and emeralds; pins, brooches, crescents, and corsage pieces; a collar and bracelets of diamonds that appeared alive with liquid life; a rope of pearls alone worth a fortune, together with numerous minor adornments needless of mention.

Though all of these were not to have been worn that evening, they had been brought in the case from the vault in the Waldorf, where Madam Arconi then was stopping, so confident was the woman that Cauto could safely guard them.

While they gazed, avarice burned brightly in the eyes of Dupont's four confederates. His lost none of their cruel complacency, however, though he rubbed his slender white hands with evil satisfaction.

"What do you think of them, Carter?" he asked, in taunting accents, reverting to the detective. "Aren't they worth the risk of one's liberty, or even the hazard of life itself?"

"Yes, they're very fine," Nick said curtly. "But you rascals will not get away with them."

"Not get away with them!" cried Hobey, with a derisive laugh. "Hang it, man, what sense is there in that? We've got away with them?"

"That's right, too," Desmond put in exultantly. "They are ours from this moment."

"Quite right, both of you," laughed Dupont, in his mirthless fashion. "We shall soon divide them in accord with the part each has played and the risks taken. What on earth can you mean, my dear Carter, by asserting that we shall not get away with them?"

The last was added with a mingling of contempt and malicious amusement that brought an uglier fire into Nick's eyes.

"You'll find out what I mean," he sternly declared, with a little more assurance than he really felt, if the truth were told. "You appear to have all the best of it just now, I'll admit, but I will wager that I yet will fool you all and run you down. If I slip up, mind you, some of my force will land you—which is equivalent to my doing so."

"Your force!" exclaimed Dupont ironically. "Why, my dear Carter, when we secured you we cut off the head of your detective force. What can be done by a hen with her head cut off?"

"Put her in the soup," growled Desmond.

"In the soup, good Desmond, is right," Dupont re-

plied approvingly, joining in the laugh that broke from the others.

"We have him in the soup, all right," Desmond added, with a lowering look at Nick. "What's to be done next?"

"Replace the jewels and close the case," Dupont commanded. "We'll wait till to-morrow and note the effects of our clever work. In the meantime, of course, we must look after the safekeeping and comfort of our guest."

"His safekeeping, yes!" Desmond growled. "But as for his comfort—that be hanged!"

"Set about it, Desmond, at once."

"Lend a hand, here, two of you," cried the rascal, hastening to obey. "We'll lug him into the cellar and stow him away in the icebox. That will serve all right until we are ready to finish him."

Hobey and Fenno at once complied, and the three lifted the chair to which Nick was bound, bearing him across the entry and into an adjoining cellar, Gilley leading the way with the lamp.

Nick gazed grimly at Hobey during this procedure, remarking pointedly, as they set him down in front of a large refrigerator in one corner of the basement:

"You've played a cur's part, my man. I have you marked, all right, and you shall pay the price. Take my word for that."

"Marked be hanged!" Hobey snarled back at him. "There'll be no payment made by any of us after you get all that's coming to you."

"Time will determine that."

"Not any time that's left for you," Hobey sneered darkly. "You're on the eternity express, with a through ticket and no stops. Don't you overlook that, Carter, for this is your last journey."

"And it won't be a long one, either," Desmond added.

Fenno had opened the door of the box while they were speaking, and the ruffians quickly set Nick inside. Otherwise, it was as empty as a drum and chilled only by the damp air of the cellar.

Dupont gazed in at him with a look of supreme content on his sardonic face.

"I shall see you again to-morrow, my dear Carter, when I may have something more to tell and show you," he said, with mock politeness. "What a pity we should have these little differences. You would have done better, far better, if you had accepted my very generous offer of two months ago."

Nick made no reply.

"If," Dupont added, "owing to anxiety or any other cause, you fail to rest well to-night, you may feel assured that within a few days at the longest, my dear Carter—you will be sleeping soundly."

Nick made no reply to this sinister threat, and Dupont drew back with a wave of his hand and closed the heavy door

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CHAPTER X.

AFTER THE INQUEST.

With two Nick Carters in the field, it is not to be wondered at that Chick Carter was puzzled. He was fairly dazed by the mystifying circumstances, in fact, when he left police headquarters after the inquest held on the morning following the crime.

It then was about the middle of the afternoon, the inquest having occupied nearly three hours, and newspapers already were out with additional details of the double crime, and analytical stories of the amazing evidence and circumstances seeming, despite his irreproachable past, to incriminate Nick Carter.

Newsboys already were shouting the sensational headlines and the face of Chick Carter took on an ugly frown when the cries of one of them fell upon his ears.

"By thunder, Patsy, we must do something to head off this business!" he declared, in tones shaken with vexation. "We're all to the bad, as matters now stand."

"Bad is no name for it," Patsy growled. "Gee! it knocks me stiff. What's the good, after all, of having stood ace-high with the community all one's life? It takes only a breath to queer the whole business. What infernal nonsense, this idea that the chief would have a hand in a crime!"

"Nonsense is right."

"What's to be done?"

"We've got to tackle the case as we find it," said Chick. "Not only tackle it, Patsy, but get at it on the jump."

"But how?"

"One thing is sure, that Nick must have been on the stage last night," Chick argued. "All of these witnesses were not mistaken, nor is it reasonable to suppose that all of them are in a plot to turn Nick down in this way."

"Surely not."

"We've got to allow, then, that he was there. He was not out of our box more than ten minutes, however, before the murder was discovered. If he spoke to Haynes, and afterward went back of the flat and

toward Madam Arconi's dressing room, it must have been within two or three minutes of the murder."

"Yes, that's plain enough."

"In that case, Patsy, he ought to have seen the crooks, for they must have been near the spot. They'd have been hanging round next to their job."

"Yes, most likely."

"But it's a hundred to one that Nick, if he saw them, would have detected something in their looks and actions to have made him suspicious. That being the case, he wouldn't have lost sight of them for an instant."

"Not he!" Patsy readily assented. "But, looking at it in that way, Chick, there should not have been any crime. If Nick was there, he would have headed it off."

"That's just the point," said Chick. "We must fall back on the alternative—that he did not see them, that he was not on that side of the stage at all, and did not go back of the drop, as Haynes testified."

"Gee!" Patsy exclaimed, quick to see the point. "You think there was another man resembling Nick?"

"Exactly."

"His double?"

"Apparently."

"Do you know of any crook who looks like him?"

"I know of one who might, by means of some of his clever work, make himself up to resemble Nick, or anybody else very closely. Furthermore, we know that he long has had a knife up his sleeve for Nick, and this may be the time that he used it."

"You mean Gaston Dupont?"

"Certainly."

"And you think the job consisted not only of murder and robbery, but also a scheme to make it appear that Nick did both?"

"That's the only plausible explanation of the evidence and circumstances," Chick asserted. "It did not occur to me until to-day, when the testimony of every witness, and the readiness with which each picked up Nick's photograph, proved conclusively that a man resembling him must have been on the stage. I now believe there were two, and that his double was Gaston Dupont."

"By Jove, you may be right!"

"I can see no other solution of the mystery."

"From that standpoint, then, one of the first couple who ran out, whom Magee testified was Nick, may have been his double."

"Precisely," Chick quickly nodded. "That, you see, would clean up one very perplexing point."

"Well, rather," said Patsy. "With that out of the way, we can assume that Nick had got wise to something and was one of the two men who followed the crooks out."

"We can assume even more."

"What's that?"

"That Nick was led into it by some crafty trick, and that it was a put-up job to get him out of the way and throw suspicion upon him," Chick argued, finally hitting the nail squarely on the head.

"Thunder!" Patsy muttered. "It would have been a complicated job, taken as a whole, and one no ordinary crook could have planned and carried out."

"Gaston Dupont is not ordinary," Chick observed.

"That's right," Patsy admitted. "But his plans must have been laid in advance. How can Dupont have learned that Nick would be at the opera last night? How did he contrive to give him away from the box and onto the stage? How did he get his rascally flippers on that coupon, which was found only a few feet from the murdered man, with blood on the back of it and——"

"Hold your horses," Chick interrupted, hit with another idea.

"What now?"

"Dupont, if he's the crook, could have got this coupon in only one way," declared Chick, drawing the bloodstained bit of pasteboard from his pocket to examine it. "The usher must have 'held out' on Nick, giving him only three coupons, instead of four, and afterward giving the fourth to Dupont."

"But Dupont, if he knew Nick was to occupy that box last night, may have had a duplicate coupon made," Patsy suggested.

"No, that's not likely."

"Why not?"

"Because, if there had been any slight miscarriage of the plot, possibly resulting in the arrest of Nick, it would have been necessary that only three coupons should be found in his pocket. If he had all four, a fifth would cut no ice in the way of evidence against him."

"By Jove! that's right."

"Patsy, we've struck a trail worth following," Chick said confidently. "You make a bee line for the opera house and learn the name of that usher and where he lives. Get on his track as quickly as possible and shadow him until he arrives at the theatre to-night. Keep an eye on him there, also, until I show up and join you. If he was bribed to take a

hand in this scheme, we may catch him receiving his payment."

"It's worth trying, for fair," Patsy declared approvingly. "I'll get after him, all right, but where are you going?"

"On a still hunt after other parties."

"What more have you doped out?"

"I'll explain in a nutshell," Chick said earnestly. "It would not have been easy for strangers to approach Cauto under the circumstances last night, to say nothing of slipping a knife into him. Madam Arconi testified that he was always faithful and vigilant. It's odds, then, that he was acquainted with at least one of his assailants, as I was led to suspect last evening. The acquaintance may have been one recently made, a crook who made friends with him solely in order to pave the way for this murder and robbery."

"By gracious, Chick, that's a thread worth picking up."

"At all events," Chick added; "I'm off to learn where Cauto has been in the habit of hanging out during the day, and with whom he has been associating. I'll see you at the opera house to-night, however, and then we will compare notes."

"Good," Patsy nodded. "I'll be there."

They parted a little later, each bent on the mission discussed.

Hastening to the opera house, Patsy learned that the name of the usher was Gilbert Page, and that he lived with his parents in a house in Ninth Avenue. There Patsy found him, a thin-featured stripling with a pair of crafty gray eyes; and from that time, then about four in the afternoon, the detective had him under surveillance.

In the meantime, Chick called on Madam Arconi at the Waldorf. From her he learned that Cauto had been in the habit of spending much of his leisure in company with a fellow countryman named Rivoli, who ran a saloon and restaurant in Third Avenue.

Chick then visited Rivoli, from whom he learned that Cauto, who could not speak English, had been quite friendly with an American whom he had recently met, who was familiar with the Italian language and who frequently served him as an interpreter.

Though Rivoli did not know this man's name, one of the bartenders, who had seen the couple together, was able to inform Chick where the man lodged, and that his name was—Tom Desmond.

Convinced that he was on a promising trail, Chick located Desmond at his lodgings about seven o'clock that evening, from which he shadowed him to a saloon on Broadway, into which Desmond sauntered as if bent only upon buying a drink.

Chick watched him from outside and saw him halt at the bar beside a young chap who, somewhat apart from several other customers, was sipping a glass of beer.

Not a little to his surprise, while still watching his quarry, Chick heard the voice of Patsy close behind him.

"Gee! We've struck oil, all right."

"Hello!" Chick muttered. "You here?"

"Rather!" said Patsy. "That young fellow in there is the usher. His name is Page."

"Ah, is that so? A rendezvous evidently. Yes, Desmond just slipped him something. A wad of dough, most likely."

"Who is Desmond?" asked Patsy.

Chick quickly informed him, which had hardly been done when Page came out of the saloon and walked rapidly away.

Before Patsy could make a move to follow the youngster, Chick grasped his arm and detained him.

"Wait! He's heading for the opera house to do his usual work," he whispered confidently. "Desmond is the one for us to shadow."

CHAPTER XI.

NICK IN A BOX.

Nick Carter passed a dismal night in the chill solitude of his confinement in the house in Harlem.

There was no possibility of escape. He knew that an attempt must prove futile. The intense gloom of the icebox in which he was seated was relieved by only a single gleam of light, which, with faint sounds that occasionally reached his ears, convinced him that one or more of the gang was constantly on guard in the cellar.

Nick spent most of the time in sizing up the case, therefore, and in how far he might be victimized by Gaston Dupont's knavish design. That it had been so craftily executed as to cast serious suspicion on him seemed next to impossible.

Nevertheless, Nick keenly realized several points that he knew were to his disadvantage—that none of the occupants of his box at the opera that evening could explain his absence; that he had spoken to no person on the stage, nor been noticed by any except the rascals by whom he had been ensnared; that the man at the stage door had hardly observed him, and

that none had noticed his departure in the automobile.

Despite these points, however, Nick did not believe that Dupont had played his game so cleverly as to seriously involve him.

Though Fenno and Gilley brought him food and drink twice the following day, and examined his bonds to be sure they were still intact, Nick saw no more of Dupont until late in the afternoon.

The door of the icebox then was opened, and the chair to which Nick was bound was lifted out into the cellar by three of the gang—Hobey and the two chauffeurs.

Daylight still found its way in through two narrow windows, and Nick discovered Dupont seated on a large wooden box, such as is ordinarily used as a packing case. He saw at once that it had been brought into the cellar since the previous night.

The floor near by was strewn with crinkly bits of wood, the droppings from a bit with which numerous holes had been bored through each side of the wooden case. On a stool near by were a box of wire nails and a hammer, also the bit and stock recently used for boring the holes.

"Those look ominous!" thought Nick. "I reckon I'm booked for even closer quarters than an icebox."

Gaston Dupont was in street attire and held in his hand one of the afternoon newspapers—that containing the most sensational story of the robbery and murder, as well as all of the seemingly incriminating details relating to Nick's apparent part in the infamous job, of all of which this particular journal had made capital.

Instead of at once submitting the paper to Nick, however, having seen him glance at the perforated packing case, Dupont laughed coldly and remarked:

"Evidently, my dear Carter, you are a good guesser. Yes, as you infer, this punctured box is designed for you. You are to be transferred in it to safer quarters; to a place of permanent safety, in fact. Transferred in it, mind you—but never out of it. It is to be your final abode, your eternal dwelling."

Nick smiled, and nodded. "You are very amusing, Dupont," he said, "and an arrant coward. Only cowards take pleasure in gloating over a foe whom they overpowered by sheer force of numbers."

"I take pleasure in informing you of your fate," was all Dupont replied to this.

"Well," said Nick carelessly, "the box appears to be clean, at least. I suppose you can't help that."

Dupont laughed in his sinister, mirthless fashion and wagged his head reprovingly.

"Don't be saucy, my dear Carter," he replied. "It is not becoming in a man so near death's door."

"I have only your boasting for that."

"You are soon to have more. I warned you that, in refusing the offer I recently made you, you so strained our relations that one of us must go down and out forever," said Dupont, glancing at the box. "Yes, it is clean, my dear Carter, much cleaner than it will be after lying for a few weeks in the mud and slime at the bottom of the East River. We have made these holes in it, that the water may reach you quickly and speedily end your discomfort."

"That's very thoughtful," said Nick, drily. "Look out that I don't slip through one of the holes and fool you."

"Thanks, my dear Carter, for the warning. It was needless, however. We shall guard against that. Before we proceed with the work you have imposed upon us," he went on, "I think you may enjoy a last look at one of the newspapers. It contains matter to which I referred last evening. Hold it open before him, good Hobey, that he may read it. Or, better still, since he is so perverse that he may refuse to read it, you read it to him aloud, that I may feel sure that he knows during his last hours precisely what has befallen him at the hands of Gaston Dupont.

Hobey laughed grimly and proceeded to obey.

Nick Carter listened, but with never a change of countenance.

The sensational headlines, the details of the double crime, the strange disappearance of Nick Carter, the evidence and circumstances seeming to incriminate him, the testimony of the numerous witnesses, the finding of the bloodstained coupon, the inability of his own assistant and companions of that evening to offer even the slightest explanation of his conduct, his continued absence and mysterious silence—all had been made of these that a fertile imagination and facile pen could possibly make, and Hobey omitted not a line or word from start to finish.

Nick Carter listened grimly, realizing for the first time in how far Dupont had accomplished his object—and how quickly, let one's past be what it may, the black cloud of calumny can leap up from under the horizon.

"Well, my dear Carter, what do you think of it?" cried Dupont exultantly, when Hobey laid aside the newspaper.

"You appear to have done what you call a good job," Nick replied.

"Ah! I thought you would say so," laughed the rascal. "I am glad it meets with your approval."

"It quite amazes me," said Nick ironically. "I wonder how you can have done it."

"Bah! That was very easy."

"Indeed?"

"For two months I have had you watched by faithful spies. I learned a week ago that you would attend the opera night before last, and easily found out which box you would occupy. Fortune favored me in that it was a box very near a door leading to the stage. I bribed the usher to give me one of the coupons, and you only three, when he showed you to the box. I foresaw that the sound of my voice would draw you from the box, and, very likely, to the stage. I made sure that you should hear it at just the right moment, by stepping into the corridor and saying a few words, and then hastening back to the stage to rejoin Hobey and Desmond, where we already had planned the more hazardous work."

"Very clever, I'm sure," commented Nick.

"I knew you would say so," smiled Dupont. "My good Desmond, who will rejoin us later, had made that end of the job comparatively easy. He was friendly with Cauto, who inadvertently showed us the way and felt no surprise when he saw us that evening. It was an easy matter to drop something on the floor in front of him, causing him to lean forward at just the right moment, and equally easy to slay him silently and quickly secure the jewels and make our escape. While doing so, I saw you just as you appeared on the stage, and, with a gesture, I signalled the fact to Hobey, who already knew the part he was to play. That no Nick Carter should be seen on the stage until after you left your box, I was in a double disguise until then. Really, my dear Carter, though the plans were complex and only the robbery a reasonably sure success, the readiness with which you entered the net made the side issue comparatively easy of execution. There now remains only—your own."

Before Nick could make a reply, Hobey put in:

"Yes, and the sooner we get at it the better. It will be dark in half an hour. The earlier we get away with the box, the less likely we are to incur suspicion. A team on Grigson's wharf too late in the evening might attract attention."

"They're going to dump me off the end of a wharf," thought Nick. "It looks like hard sledding for me, for fair."

Dupont sprang down from the box and nodded approvingly.

"Set about it, then," he commanded. "You slip away, Gilley, and bring the wagon round in about an hour."

"I'll have it here, all right."

Not a word came from Nick Carter during what followed.

Cutting him free from the chair, yet leaving his limbs securely bound, the three ruffians tied a gag in his mouth, then forced him into the packing case and nailed on the cover.

Nick heard the last nail driven home, and then the voice of Hobey fell on his ears.

"We'll take him out of the bulkhead door and through the alley," he growled. "It'll be time enough to open the door when the team is here. I'm going up for a drink. This sort of business takes all of my nerve."

"Not a bad idea," Dupont returned. "Come with us, Fenno, if you like. He now is in safe keeping."

Nick heard them move away and mount the cellar stairs.

He knew that, if anything was to be done for life and liberty, it must be done then and there.

It is when death thus stares one in the face that desperation lends one superhuman strength.

Worming around in the box, Nick contrived to turn upon his knees, getting his back and shoulders against the top of the box. Then, with all the power of which he was possessed and his strength was tremendous—he pressed upward steadily.

With a thrill of satisfaction, he felt the cover begin to give.

By slow degrees the nails yielded, the more quickly after they began.

There was an ugly fire in Nick's eyes when, at the end of a quarter-hour, he so far had raised the cover that the was able to rise to his feet and press it back. With haste, still born of desperation, he found a protruding nail in one edge of the box, by means of which, working it into the knots of the line securing his wrists, he finally succeeded in freeing them. Both were wet with blood when the trick was accomplished.

To free his feet, then, was the work of only a minute.

It had become dark in the cellar.

The voices of the men in the kitchen overhead could be faintly heard.

Presently, just as Nick had completed his work, he

heard the bang of the house door, and then the rumble of a wagon driven up to the curb.

The voice of Desmond then reached Nick's ears, and he knew that Gilley had returned with the team, that it would not be kept waiting, and that the rascals would speedily troop back into the cellar.

Working quickly and quietly, Nick replaced the cover of the box as neatly as possible, and then set about finding the bulkhead door mentioned.

Before he could locate it, he heard Hobey on his way down, remarking while he came:

"I'll get that door open. One of you watch outside, and the others come and help me dump out the box."

Nick darted back of a corner of the icebox.

Hobey came down the stairs a bit unsteadily, bringing a lamp.

He set it on the box, not observing that the cover had been disturbed, and then proceeded to unlock a bulkhead door opening into the back yard.

Nick Carter saw him unlock it, and then heard the steps of his approaching confederates.

With the stealth of a cat, Nick darted from his concealment. Then followed a bound, and a single terrific blow—and Hobey went to the cellar floor as inert and senseless as a bag of meal.

Nick crouched quickly and whipped out a revolver from the ruffian's hip pocket.

The slight noise had not reached the ears of the coming knaves. Talking glibly, they hastened down the stairs—Dupont, Desmond, and Fenno.

They had nearly reached the box on which the lamp was standing, when Dupont noticed the loose cover.

"By thunder!" he cried, glancing sharply around. "There's something wrong with——"

Then he caught sight of Hobey's prostrate figure, and that of the great detective, and his words ended with a yell.

It was mingled with the commands instantly thundered by Nick Carter.

"Hands up! I'll kill the first man who shows fight!"

Desmond wheeled and saw him. He saw also, perhaps, a vision of the electric chair. At all events, he leaped toward the lamp and attempted to dash it to the floor.

Bang!

Nick Carter fired on the instant, and Desmond went down with a bullet in his brain.

At the same moment the bulkhead door was torn open from outside, and Chick Carter and Patsy Garvan leaped down the steps and into the cellar, having shadowed Desmond to the house.

Fenno had thrown up his hands and was shouting for mercy.

The hand of Gaston Dupont, however, went to his vest pocket and then to his lips. The clinking of a broken vial fallen to the floor was mingled with his own downward crash.

Nick Carter leaped up and ran to crouch above him.

"Too late!" he exclaimed, turning to his approaching assistants. "The rascal has swallowed poison. He has cheated the chair."

"Never mind," cried Chick triumphantly. "Let's be satisfied that we have cheated him."

"Gee! that's right, too!" shouted Patsy.

There was little to be done then and there to wind up the case. Gilley was caught outside, and, in company with Fenno and Hobey, was rushed away to the Tombs. Page was arrested at the opera house an hour later, and subsequently confessed his part in the crime. All four went to Sing Sing for fifteen years.

The bodies of Desmond and Dupont were taken to the rooms of an undertaker that night, pending the permanent disposal of them.

In one of the upper rooms of the house, which it was learned that Dupont had been lately occupying, were found all of Madam Arconi's jewels, still in the case in which they had been stolen. They were restored to her by Nick Carter that very evening, eliciting expressions of gratitude and admiration, together with a reward that paid Nick well for the time and chances he had taken.

It seems needless to add that all of the newspapers came out with very different stories the following morning. After the remarkable attempt to fasten a crime upon him, Nick appeared in the limelight as never before.

THE END.

It looks as if Gaston Dupont has played once too often against the greatest American detective. Has Nick given the crafty Frenchman his finish, or will he, by some amazing *coup,* resume once more his career of rascality. That is a question many thousands of you will be interested in, and which the next issue number of this weekly will answer. The story is, "A Battle for a Million; or, Nick Carter's Master Device." There is a little stunt performed by means of the wireless telegraph that adds in no small degree to Nick's reputation as a peerless detective. You'd better make sure of getting this story, and to that end bear in mind the number. It is 703. Out next week.

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RAISING GINGER'S HAIR.

Pitz! Pitz!

"Got him!" chuckled Brown Minor, removing the pea-shooter from his mouth. "My hat! and didn't he skip."

"Hop down, you fool, or they'll spot you," whispered Jones—more commonly known as Porkey, owing to the amplitude of his person.

"Give us a back, one of you," said Brown, "and I'll tickle him again."

I doubled myself up as required, and Brown Minor, who had been leaning with his elbows on the playground wall and his feet dangling, slid down so that his hob-nailed boots came to rest gently in the middle of my neck.

"He's got ginger hair, and is as thin as a goal post. Did you ever see such a rotten-looking specimen?" remarked Brown contemptuously. "And he has to be fetched, like a kiddie, by its 'nuss.'" He slipped some more peas into his mouth, and raised his head, sideways, cautiously above the wall.

The object of this eulogy was the new third-form master, Mr. Fraser—"Ginger," as he soon came to be called by us fellows.

Mr. Carson, who is master of the Shell at St. Jude's, and a regular brick—though he may, possibly, not appear so in this story—had been to meet the new master, and was now returning with him from the station. For some reason or other the master of the third has always been horribly ragged, so it struck us as a brilliant notion of Brown Minor's, and quite a natural proceeding, that we should lie in ambush for the newcomer with the deliberate intention of greeting him on his arrival with a volley of peas. It was well he should understand we meant ragging from the start. The traditions of the school must be kept up.

The two masters advanced to within a few yards of where we stood. We could hear distinctly what they were saying. "It may have been a wasp," remarked the new master—"very possibly. Whatever it was, it gave me an uncommonly nasty sting." Porkey chuckled softly. Brown, his face hidden by the kindly branches of a tree, sucked in his lips and blew out his cheeks. Another pea sped swiftly from the slender tube.

But this time the marksman was less fortunate in his aim. The missile—as Brown explained to me afterward—instead of striking Ginger, for whom it was intended, caught Mr. Carson neatly on the left ear. He put up his hand with a sharp ejaculation of pain.

"Ah, and now it has stung you," exclaimed his companion. "If it is a wasp, it must be an unusually big one."

Mr. Carson stooped and picked up the offending pea. Then his eyes turned in the direction of the wall.

"He's twigged!" gasped Brown, and came down with a rush, bringing me to the ground along with him. We were on our feet again, though, instantly.

"You silly Juggins!" I growled.

"Cut!" whispered Brown laconically.

We scooted for all we were worth, and did not pause till we had reached the friendly shelter of the fives court. Porkey, who had come in last, leaned up against the wall and gasped for breath. Brown gave a low, expressive whistle. "My word! that was a narrow squeak and no mistake," he chuckled. "Luckily neither of them saw me."

But Brown was mistaken, as was brought painfully home to his consciousness that night at prep. He was just shutting his books when Mr. Carson strolled casually up to him and laid his hand upon his shoulder. "Your father is a soldier, Brown?"

"Yes, sir," answered Brown, wondering what on earth he was driving at.

"The son of such a distinguished officer as Major-General Brown should be a good marksman," observed Mr. Carson sweetly. He dipped a finger and thumb into his waistcoat pocket and produced a pea. Brown suddenly looked very silly, and reddened to the roots of his hair.

"I believe this is some of your ammunition," went on Mr. Carson. "I pay myself the compliment of inferring it was not meant for me. Unfortunately for you, it struck me. You will, therefore, Brown, write me out five thousand times the following line: 'I must learn to shoot straight.' Next time," he concluded, with a faint twinkle in his eye, "you will perhaps hit whom you intend to."

Brown was sick and no mistake. He threw all the blame upon Ginger, which really appeared to me a little unreasonable. "The beastly sneak!" he said. "I'll pay him out—you wait and see!" When Brown promises to do anything he invariably keeps his word; so I foresaw trouble.

Ginger was unpopular from the very start. He was such a slink-round-the-corner sort of beggar; you felt you could never trust him. The very first day he took the third he played a dirty trick that prejudiced us fellows against him. In this instance, as upon most other occasions, it was his absurd superstitiousness that led him to act unwisely.

I have never known such a superstitious idiot as Ginger. The crossing of a couple of nibs, the spilling of a little ink, or the dropping of a pen, all had their definite premonition for him. At the time he came to take charge of the third there were exactly thirteen of us in the form, counting the five fellows who had just been moved up. Now, thirteen is supposed to be an unlucky number, as every one knows, and Ginger was a firm adherent to the popular belief. What does he do, then? He shunts young Jenkins, one of the five fellows that had just been sent up, down into the second form again, on the pretext that his work is not up to the required standard, and that he should never have been moved. Jenkins is one of those mild idiots who never kick at anything. I believe if you threw a pail of water over him he would only gasp, and then quietly take out his pocket handkerchief and wipe himself down. He is a bit of an ass, I'll admit; but that has nothing to do with it. Though Jenkins said next to nothing, the other fellows expressed themselves pretty strongly, and if Ginger had heard only half of what they said about him I guess his ears would have tingled.

None gave vent to his feelings more forcibly than Brown Minor. He had always been friendly disposed toward young Jenkins—it has often puzzled me whatever he could see in the fellow to interest him—and now he became chummier with him than ever. He vowed, as soon as an opportunity presented itself, to revenge Jenkins' wrongs as well as his own. Weeks passed, however, without Brown having car-

ried his threat into effect. I began to think that, for once, after all, he was not going to keep his word; the more so as there was not the slightest indication of malice in his behavior toward Ginger, and he seemed to me to be rather on good terms with him than otherwise. Nevertheless, he and Jenkins continued just as thick pals as ever. Jenkins' people are well to do, and he gets heaps of grub and tin sent him; perhaps Brown's friendship for him has not always been entirely unselfish and disinterested.

Besides being superstitious, and having ginger-colored hair, Mr. Fraser was very short-sighted. That is how Porkey, who sat in a corner at the end of the back row—he is always bottom of the form—acquired the habit of dipping into works other than educational, under cover of the desk. Porkey is an absolute cormorant for literature, and has the rummiest taste in books of any fellow I have ever known.

He hangs about second-hand bookstalls, and picks up the oldest, dustiest volumes he can lay his hands upon. I have sometimes doubted whether Jones really finds any pleasure in reading such stuff, and if it is not merely "side" on his part; some people have a craving for notoriety, no matter under what queer pretext, and a reputation once gained has to be kept up. At last, though, one afternoon, when Porkey was reading a book he had open under the desk instead of doing his Latin exercise, Ginger did spot him.

"Jones, come here!" he said.

Porkey got up, putting the book down on the form.

"No; bring what you were reading with you."

Porkey, with a vain attempt to appear unconcerned, approached Ginger's desk.

"Ah! Dickens' 'Memoirs of Grimaldi,'" said Ginger, taking the paper-backed volume from Porkey. "A very interesting book, Jones—very interesting."

"Yessir," agreed Porkey.

"There is a very curious incident recorded in it, respecting Grimaldi the elder." Ginger turned the leaves rapidly, scanning the pages over the top of his goggles. "Ah, here it is, on page five: 'A singular trait in this individual's character was a vague and profound dread of the fourteenth day of the month. At its approach he was always nervous, disquieted, and anxious; directly it had passed he was another man again . . . . it is remarkable that he actually died on the fourteenth day of March; and that he was born, christened, and married on the fourteenth of the month.' Is that not inexplicable, Jones?"

"Yessir," returned Jones, with an expression of deep awe.

"Such mysterious events are of more common occurrence than we imagine," went on Ginger, looking very profound. "We are in the habit of dismissing from our minds as curious coincidences much of what we cannot understand; in this way we blunt our senses to all spiritual promptings. I am keenly interested in the supernatural, and have for long been intending to write a work upon the subject, but have not yet collected sufficient material. If any of you boys has ever had a mysterious experience of any kind, I should much like to hear it." Ginger coughed awkwardly, and, taking off his goggles, polished them on the corner of his coat tail, then put them on again. Dawson Secundus—there are four Dawsons, all brothers—held up his hand.

"Well, Dawson?" inquired Ginger.

"I dreamt one night I was going to have an impot, sir—I mean an imposition, sir—and the next morning I got a thousand lines."

"Not so very astonishing, Dawson, seeing that you manage to get one set almost every day. What is it, Macdonald?"

"Ma grandmither once thought she saw a ghost."

"Sit down, Macdonald!" said Ginger sharply. "Never having had the pleasure of knowing your grandmother, it doesn't interest me in the slightest."

Then Brown stood up. "Please, sir," he said, "I've something to tell you which I think you'd like to know."

"Very well; go on," assented Ginger.

"It's about the room you sleep in. It's supposed to be haunted."

"Haunted?" repeated Ginger, in an incredulous tone of voice. "Don't talk nonsense, Brown!"

"Really, sir, I'm not. Some one was killed in the room, or committed suicide, or something of the sort, and now on certain nights, people say, a sort of faint pattering can be heard upon the floor, like footsteps—'the devil's footsteps,' they call it."

We fellows stared at Brown in amazement. This was the first any of us had heard of his strange story.

"I trust, Brown, that this is merely a little piece of imaginative fiction on your part?" observed Ginger dubiously.

"Oh, no, sir!" said Brown, with an expression of supreme innocence.

"Hem! Very extraordinary. Well, if you have nothing more to tell me, sit down. And you, Jones, go back to your seat; you can come to me for your book after school hours. I will now correct those exercises."

I was anxious to exchange a few words with Brown, and it seemed an age to me before the bell sounded from the playground for dismissal.

"There wasn't any truth in all that nonsense you told Ginger?" I asked him, as the class dispersed into the corridor.

"What do you think?" said Brown, with a broad grin.

"But what a lot of fearful whackers you——"

"If Ginger was ass enough to swallow them all, that's his own lookout. I've got a brilliant idea. I've been waiting a long time for a chance to pay the beggar out, and now at last I see my way clear. Didn't you see what a blue funk he was in when I spun him that yarn? I'll give the beast such a scare as he never had in his life; I'll raise Ginger's hair for him."

"But how?" I asked.

"Never mind; wait and you'll see," answered Brown, winking mysteriously. And that was all I could get out of him.

* * * * * * *

There are two dormitories at St. Jude's; I sleep in the one on the upper story, so do Brown and Porkey. Facing it on the opposite side of the corridor is a large room used for storing linen, cricketing flannels, and so forth. Mr. Carson's room adjoins this at the stair end of the passage; Ginger's is lower down on the landing.

That night I had a touch of toothache and could not sleep, and I kept on puzzling whatever Brown had meant when he said that now at last he saw his way clear to paying Ginger out, and that he would raise his hair for him. At last I was just dropping off to sleep when I was startled by a terrible scream coming from the direction of Ginger's room. Almost simultaneous with it a stifled chuckle sounded from the bed next mine, which was Brown Minor's.

"What's that?" I whispered.

"Ginger," spluttered Brown, from under the bedclothes. "What a lark!"

Another yell louder than the former echoed along the passage. I got out of bed; several of the fellows who were awake followed suit, and we crept together out into the corridor. At the door we met Mr. Carson; he was in his dressing gown and held a candle in his hand.

"Get back to bed, you boys," he ordered, and hastened off down the passage. Needless to say, we followed him notwithstanding. Mr. Carson descended the stairs toward Ginger's room. Just as he reached the door, it opened, and there stood Ginger in his night attire, his eyes staring, his hair tangled, and his face white as chalk.

"Mr. Fraser! Why, whatever is the matter?" inquired Mr. Carson, an expression of mingled astonishment and amusement on his face. "Aren't you well?"

Ginger gasped at him idiotically. "It's haunted!" he gasped. "Haunted!"

"Rubbish! Fraser, you're not well—you've been dreaming."

"No, I've not. I heard it—it distinctly, several times—the pattering of f—f—feet upon the floor—'the devil's footsteps!'"

"What on earth is the man talking about?" exclaimed Mr. Carson, looking still more bewildered.

Some of the fellows tittered, and Brown gave me a dig in the ribs with his elbow. "Isn't he in a funk?" he whispered.

"I couldn't believe my—my own ears at first," Ginger rambled on; "but then I heard it distinctly again—and—and again. It was horrible!"

Mr. Carson pushed him on one side and entered the room.

"Why, there is nothing here," he said, with a short laugh, holding up the candle so that its light flooded the whole of the little room. "Hello! here's some water spilled on the floor; you must have knocked over your water bottle in the dark. Hem! and what's this?" He picked up a pea from the floor.

"Here's another, sir," said Porkey—one or two of us fellows had ventured into the room. "I trod on it."

"You boys be off back to bed at once," ordered Mr. Carson severely. "Now then, look sharp!"

As we were getting into bed again Brown touched me on the elbow and gave a sly wink. "See here," he said, and took from under his nightgown something flat and square—it was the top of a biscuit tin. "Herein lies the key to the mystery," he informed me. "This lid, which I got from young Jenkins, a few peas, and a little water, and you have the explanation of 'the devil's footsteps.'" He hid the lid under his bed; then winked at me again. "You will see more fun to-morrow night," he said. "I haven't done with Ginger yet, you bet."

Nothing occurred, however, the following night, and Brown looked sullen and uncomfortable when I reminded him next morning of his promise. That same day at prep. he had an unpleasant surprise himself, though I think he rather expected something of the sort to happen. Mr. Carson approached him with that sweet smile which his face always wears when he is going to say or do something particularly unpleasant.

"You are apparently a bit of a humorist, Brown," he observed. "The disadvantage of playing jokes upon other people is that one is apt, so often, to have to pay for one's witticisms. It so happens that Mr. Fraser and I changed rooms last night. 'The well-laid schemes o' mice an' men——' you know, Brown. You will now come with me and reap the just reward of your humor. I found thirteen peas in all in the tin and on the floor. I shall therefore give you thirteen cuts with the cane, one for each pea—thirteen is an unlucky number, Brown."

And that was the conclusion of Brown Minor's little joke.

* * * * * * *

He explained the whole affair to me later. In Ginger's room, behind the door, stands a small gas stove, which is lit at night during the cold weather. One day a brilliant idea had come to Brown. He obtained the lid of a biscuit tin from Jenkins, and revealed to him his plans under promise of the strictest secrecy. On the night of Ginger's scare he had crept out of bed and filled the lid with water, and then, dropping a handful of peas into it, he had placed it on the top of the lighted stove in Ginger's room. Naturally when the water commenced to boil the peas swelled, and, jumping out of the tin, skipped along the floor. In the dark and the silence of the night the smallest sound is, as everybody knows, enormously exaggerated, especially if one is of a nervous and imaginative temperament. Such is the simple explanation of "the devil's footsteps."

Ginger is now no longer at St. Jude's—for which the gods be praised! Brown says that no matter how good a joke may be, it is never safe to suppose it will go down twice.

WHERE RUBIES COME FROM.

All the world's great rubies come from the mines of the Mogok valley, India. There are four principal mines in the valley, in each of which modern tools and machinery are used, which facilitate the proper examination of a large amount of byon or ruby-bearing clay every day. In adjacent valleys the Burmans still prosecute their searches in the old way, digging and washing by hand labor, but often with astonishing results.

In the large workings the system is reduced to a science, with corresponding results, says the Chicago *Tribune*. The work goes on day and night. The byon is extracted by the open quarry method of removing all the surface down to the ruby-bearing clay, which is then dug up, carried on trolleys to the steam-cleansing mill, washed, passed through the sieves, and then examined for rubies and spinels. The byon stretches almost everywhere along the Mogok valley, and wherever this rich, old-gold' crumbling clay exists rubies are to be found.

Besides the pure ruby, spinel or balas rubies are found in large quantities at Mogok. Wherever the ruby is found the spinel is certain to crop up close beside it. They are both crystals of alumina, but of different shapes. While the true ruby is pure corundum only, the spinel has a minute quantity of magnesium, which lessens its hardness one-fifth. Except in a few rare cases the expert can distinguish readily between the two.

At the mines the rubies are separated to a certainty from the spinels by the use of the dichroiscope. The gem is placed in the instrument so that a ray of light passes through it and is polarized. The true ruby shows a pure red ray, while the spinel shows a slight tinge of blue with the red. There are a few really magnificent spinels in existence, the first among them all being the great Agincourt ruby in the English crown. Although the mines in the Mogok valley have produced practically all the rubies of ancient and modern times, it is difficult to learn how long these mines have been in operation, for it was always the policy of the Burmese kings to keep them as mysterious and secluded as possible.

It is known, however, that mines were in operation for a long time previous to 1600. At one mine alone 1,400 tons of byon is washed daily through the busiest seasons, with resulting prosperity to the population. During the season as many as 2,000 workmen, nearly all Burmans, are employed.

Rubies are more precious than diamonds, and are practically indestructible except by fire. While a flawless diamond may be worth roughly about $100, a perfect ruby of the same weight would be worth at least double. But the increase in value as the size increases is much greater in rubies than in diamonds. A diamond of ten karats is worth perhaps $4,000, while a ruby of that weight may be worth any price up to $10,000, which was the value placed on a stone exhibited at the Franco-British exhibition in London last year.

The Burman is inclined to invest his savings in rubies and diamonds, which may be readily realized upon in times of financial stress.

ONE WAY OUT OF IT.

The dentist's chair may fairly be said to be like conscience. It makes cowards of us all. So it was with a certain youthful hypocrite.

"What!" said the little boy's mother, "back already? Well, I'm glad it's over. Did it hurt much?"

"I—I didn't have it out."

"What? Didn't you go to the dentist's?"

"Yes'm, but there was two people ahead of me."

"Why didn't you wait?"

"I—I was afraid they'd feel ashamed if I stayed and heard them holler."

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